



DARK STRANGER

PIPER STONE

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Dark Stranger

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This book is intended for *adults only*. Spanking and other sexual activities represented in this book are fantasies only, intended for adults.

PROLOGUE



*I*t all started with a single phone call in the dead of night, a dark, sensual voice telling me I was his salvation.

That very soon he was coming for me.

And it changed everything...

CHAPTER 1



“In visions of the dark night I have dreamed of joy departed. But a waking dream of life and light hath left me broken hearted.”

—Edgar Allan Poe

Sierra

Electricity crackled in the air, although there was no storm. I was inside my house, a place I thought safe. I should have known better. As my heart raced, I sensed a presence and a terrifying realization settled in.

The dark stranger had found me, a man whose deep, mysterious baritone voice on the other end of the phone had evoked intense, filthy fantasies. For weeks he'd contacted me, never providing a name, his number blocked.

But with every call, I'd been drawn deeper into unearthing feelings I'd never believed could be provoked again.

Excitement.

Hunger.

Need.

Now I had no idea how to face the unknown.

He was my stalker and he'd become the man capable of seducing me.

He was here to make good on his promise of making me his own.

As he moved closer, electricity surged from my heart straight to my core. Just the way it had done during several of his phone calls. The strong connection still didn't make any sense. No, this wasn't happening. He wasn't a long-lost lover. The man was deranged.

“Hello, Sierra. It's time we got to know each other even more intimately than before.”

His voice drifted from the shadows, the surrounding darkness adding to the terror that swept through me. His sensuous voice had thrilled me during long nights of loneliness. Only this time the tone was entirely different; every syllable was infused with a growl.

One of desire.

One of impatience.

One of fury.

And one of possession.

Just like he'd promised five months ago, and just as he'd warned me again just hours before with a note and a single phone call that he was coming to claim what he believed already belonged to him.

Oh, my God. He'd broken into my house.

He planned on making good on his promises.

My pulse raced as I turned around slowly, trying to control my breathing, the deep resonance of his tone penetrating my eardrums. His scent was overpowering yet alluring, reminding me of my favorite Grenache, the rich raspberry notes mixing with more than a hint of exotic spices. For a few seconds, that's all I could think about.

And there was no doubt about the identity of the dark stranger. He was the man who'd haunted my dreams for months, invading my privacy. My thoughts. My desires...

Alessandro.

“Who are you?” While my earlier assessment only hours before at the wine and book bistro I owned had been correct, he was nothing but a liar. Still, the sense of foreboding stilled my heart. The man who called himself Alessandro was without a doubt the dark stranger, the man who’d unceremoniously pulled me out of an intense fog that had nearly derailed my life. He’d had no accent on the phone, yet in the bistro I’d easily detected his Spanish heritage. The dark timbre sent a shower of tenuous sensations straight to my core. I’d known one day he’d come for me, making good on a threat that seemed perversely more like the kiss of a promise, the draw to him unmistakably cruel yet undeniable.

How in God’s name hadn’t I been able to see through his façade, the pretense of bullshit he’d tossed at me only a few hours before? He’d dared to enter an establishment I owned, my beloved Corks and Books, pretending to be someone he wasn’t. And how had he managed to break down my defenses?

I sensed he was walking closer and then a stream of moonlight provided a partial silhouette. The intruder was tall, his massive frame sending a wave of tremors throughout my system.

“Don’t you recognize me, my sweet kitten? Tell me. Have you thought of me at night, wondering when I’d come for you? Have you fantasized about what I’d do, craving what you know only I can provide?” He stepped further into the shimmer staining the floor and I shuddered.

The limited light inside the bistro had kept me from fully recognizing him, but now, as he stood here, it was as if I’d always known him. Torment swam beneath the surface of the man. While his face remained expressionless, his eyes bore anger and hatred, taunting me for months for an unknown reason. Darkness enshrouded him, pulling against his godlike features. They appeared entirely different than those of the gorgeous man who’d enjoyed a glass of wine with me at the bistro while holding an intellectual discussion regarding my favorite book.

A stalker. He was nothing but a monstrous pursuer who’d disrupted my life. He’d accomplished his goal of hiding his real identity when he entered my bookstore, acting as if we’d

just met. I fisted my hand, fighting off the sickening urges pulsing through me like a wildfire.

“What do you want?” I knew the answer. I’d pretended his warning wouldn’t occur. Four months had passed since then, every week allowing me to forget what he’d said would happen.

“What do I want? The answer is not what I want, but what I’m going to take. But you already know that. Don’t you?” His long, dark lashes fanned across his cheeks, his dark eyes piercing mine.

I backed away, taking careful steps toward the lamp on the nightstand by my bed. Without making a sound, I wrapped my fingers around the base, trying to watch his every move. “I don’t understand.”

“You’ve been a very bad girl, Sierra. You shouldn’t have angered me by contacting the police.”

“You need to get out of here. They’re already on their way.” While I tried to have conviction in my voice, I could tell I’d failed, my tone sounding weak. “They know exactly who you are.” My lie didn’t sound convincing.

He laughed again as he continued advancing like a predator. My body was paralyzed, my mind unable to think clearly.

“You must think me a fool, Sierra, but I can tell you enjoy playing our little game. I assure you that I’ll provide you with several opportunities to savor every moment of my domination. I will so enjoy stripping away the thick armor you’ve placed around yourself, revealing more of the sensual woman hidden inside. And I will enjoy watching you bloom, opening up to the rays of sunlight showered over every inch of your voluptuous body. However, it’s time for you to be punished. I’m not an easy man, Sierra. When I’m finished with you, you’ll be begging and screaming for more.”

His words skittered into my mind, my inner voice telling me to fight for my existence, yet the attraction to him remained, a crazy moment of feeling like I was spiraling out of control.

“You’re crazy,” I whispered, trying to plan how to escape.

“As I told you on the phone, *mi dulce gatita*, your life for his. I’ve come to collect for a debt owed to me and to my family. And I always make good on my promises.” He flicked on the only other light in the room and a feeling of utter suffocation formed in my throat as I gazed into his eyes. I blinked several times, trying to fathom how this had happened, how I wasn’t able to see through his deceit. I’d had a conversation with him. I’d allowed him to touch me, to kiss me.

To taste me.

To slide his fingers into my wetness, his tongue pushing me into a powerful orgasm.

And I’d hungered for more.

Why hadn’t I made the connection with the voice on the other end of the phone, the one I’d found myself looking forward to, disappointed when his calls stopped cold?

The scent of him reeked of exotic spices and cedar wood, the fragrance entirely too intoxicating. I was thrown by the haze forming around my eyes as I was forced to stare into his, his harsh gaze entirely different from the eyes of the man who’d attempted to seduce me at the bistro. His eyes were a glimpse into his pitch-black soul, the bottomless caverns tearing through me. But there was also a glimmer of light that terrified me even more.

Burning desire.

The man was going to devour me with or without my permission.

His expression was stern, commanding, yet it didn’t take away from his stunning good looks. Every muscle was honed to perfection, his angular jaw highlighted by the hint of a beard and mustache, his long eyelashes and hooded obsidian eyes finishing the dangerous vibe that he’d embraced. His presence commanded power and respect, and I sensed he would demand that from me.

Bullshit.

I’d never give it to him.

It was time to break the spell.

“I don’t who you really are or what you want, but if you don’t leave my home, I’ll have no choice but to have you arrested.”

His smirk indicated amusement. “As I said, I take what I want and it’s long past time.”

Inhaling, he tilted his head, his eyes sparkling in the dim lighting. His face was chiseled, his bone structure aristocratic. For some reason I concentrated on his voluptuous lips, almost pressing my fingers against mine as I remembered the few minutes of heated passion we’d shared at the bistro. He’d awakened something inside of me that I’d believed long dead. Even now, my panties remained damp from his searing touch and the remembrance of his commanding whispers.

He was gorgeous, dangerous, and I’d fallen into a trap that I could have stopped months before. Even now, the gruffness of his seductive voice left me hot and wet all over.

“Who are you talking about? What debt?” I asked, horrified that I already knew the answer. When he took another step closer, I whimpered, hating myself for doing so. My phone. Where was my phone? On the kitchen table. If I could grab it and run into the street, maybe I’d be able to get away from him.

“Don’t you know, my sweet kitten? Haven’t you realized by now that you were living a lie for over a year? What you will soon learn is that no one crosses either myself or a single member of the Montenegro family without paying a hefty price. Every action has consequences.”

The Montenegro family. As in the brutal mafia syndicate out of New York?

Wait. That didn’t make any sense.

“I’ll ask you one last time. Who the fuck are you? Did you make up a lie when you seduced me in the bistro? Did you really think I’d buy your bullshit?” I demanded, humiliated I remained wet after the incredible moment of passion.

His smirk was filled with delight. “I would never lie to you. My name is Alessandro Montenegro.”

I repeated the name in my mind until finally recognition settled in. I'd been right. He was a brutal, ruthless man who'd reportedly murdered several people in cold blood. Oh, God. Oh, dear God. How could this be happening?

"Tristen? You killed Tristen, you fucking bastard." I'd known something was wrong four years before to this day, the moment my world had crumbled when I'd received a single phone call in the middle of the night. I hadn't been allowed to see Tristen's body because it had been too mangled from the accident. At least that's what I'd been told. The casket had remained closed, his family acting as if they didn't know who I was or why I was at the funeral in the first place. Tears formed in my eyes even as a nagging feeling rushed into the back of my mind.

Tristen's odd behavior, his refusal to talk about his work had bothered me, enough that we'd argued several times during our last month spent together.

"No, my precious flower. Unfortunately, I've been forced to wait for four long years to have my revenge. I plan on enjoying every minute of recouping the debt owed."

What the hell was he talking about? "I don't understand."

"You will very soon, my sweet kitten. Now, it's time for your penance."

He closed the distance without warning, but I managed to yank the lamp from the nightstand, smashing the antique piece given to me by my mother against his face as soon as he was close, a hysterical wail erupting from my throat.

"Fuck!" he hissed, startled enough I was able to jump to the side and make a dash for the door. "You shouldn't have done that, Sierra. I've been patient long enough."

He snapped his hand around my wrist, jerking me back with enough force I was lifted off the floor before being slammed against his chest. Even as I tried to fight him, pummeling my fists against his rock-solid frame, he easily yanked my arms over my head, wrapping the long fingers of one hand around both my wrists.

Blood trickled from the wound I'd inflicted, but it no longer seemed to bother him. He radiated power, utter dominance, and the heat pouring over me was explosive. I was still attracted to him, my nipples fully aroused. While a small portion of my mind screamed in silence that my reaction was insane, my mouth watered from his rough handling of me.

When he raked his fingers down my blouse, I bit back a yelp, determined not to let this freak of a man get a reaction from me. I was shocked when he wasted no time ripping the top that I'd spent far too much on to shreds, tossing it aside.

His breathing was ragged, so much so that his chest was heaving. The scent of his desire wafted into my nostrils, filtering into every cell. I found myself drunk on the fragrance, so lightheaded I could no longer feel my feet. I struggled again until he gripped my throat, rubbing his thumb back and forth across my lower lip, his actions rough and demanding.

"I suggest you learn to be a good girl, Sierra. You won't like what happens if you aren't." His words reverberated in my ears, adding to the woozy feeling in my stomach. I continued to struggle, almost breaking free twice. Each time, he jerked me back into position, his dark eyes piercing mine.

"Just let me go. I haven't done anything to you."

"It's not what you've done but what you'll learn to do for me."

I shuddered at his answer, another promise of what would come. He was so strong, his fingers ripping through the thin lace of my bra, snapping the straps as if they were paper thin. Then he slipped his hand around me, unfastening my skirt. As he wrangled it to the floor, I heard myself whimper several times. The fear had left me hollow inside, fighting to process what was happening. When I stood in only panties, an expensive lacy red thong I'd purchased the day I'd lured a famous author to commit to a book signing in my little bookstore and wine shop, I couldn't stand looking into his eyes any longer.

With another snap of his wrist, my thong was tossed to the side. I'd never felt so humiliated in my life, a warm flush now splashed across my neck and cheeks. I'd also never been so

vulnerable, terrified of what he had planned for me. Before I could object, he sat down on the bed, yanking me over his lap. Then he brought his hand down several times, the pain soaring through me but also creating several waves of tingles. This just couldn't be happening.

I wiggled, almost managing to drop off his lap. His growl was more ominous than before as he jerked me back into position, immediately fisting my hair, yanking my head up by several inches. "You need to learn there's no escape and that we're just getting started."

He was like a crazed man, the look in his eyes what nightmares were made of. "Let me go."

"But we're having so much fun, you and I." The moment he loosened his hold, I took several scattered pants, wincing when he brushed his fingers down the crack of my ass.

Alessandro brought his hand down repeatedly, and anguish skittered down my legs. I remained nauseous, tears forming in my eyes. None of this made any sense. My mind stayed muddled as the spanking continued. The dark stranger delivered several brutal strikes in a row, each one harder than the one before. Despite his hold, I pitched my body back and forth, repulsed to realize his cock was thick and hard, throbbing against my stomach.

He brought his hand down in rapid motions, the rhythm providing a dull thump in my ears. Visions formed, every one of them vivid and detailed. Almost instantly another sick thought of yearning shattered any concept of sanity I thought I had. He continued the harsh punishment, the savagery of what he was doing pushing me into a lull. The moment he stopped long enough to caress my skin, every muscle tightened, and I clenched my bottom.

The bastard rolled his finger between my ass cheeks, shoving it between my slickened thighs. When he dared to tease my pussy lips, I bucked as hard as possible, able to throw my arm out, striking him across the neck.

Hissing, he wrenched my arm behind my back, his fingers digging into my skin, placing one leg over mine. "I can tell

you're going to need a much stronger lesson, Sierra. That will come. I assure you that it will. You fight me yet you're very wet. I know you enjoyed our playtime."

"You're a sick, disgusting man."

"I've been called several vile things over the years, Sierra. I take every one of them as a compliment."

Everything about his deep baritone added to the unyielding wave of desire. It sickened me I'd been excited by his calls and my body's betrayal as he continued taunting me, and the fact he was sliding his fingers just past my swollen folds was intolerable. Yet as the scent of my hunger wafted between us, there was no denying a bizarre flash of electricity resonating from his heated body into mine.

"Very wet," he said under his breath as he thrust several fingers deep inside, immediately flexing them open then driving long and hard. "Just like before. You hunger for more."

I opened my mouth to scream, but there was nothing but strangled breaths pushing up from my throat, the pleasure far too enjoyable. I was in a fog. This wasn't real. I would wake up soon in my own bed by myself.

Even as I repeated the words in my mind, a moment of sheer bliss activated my core, the rush of sensations pushing me toward a climax, and he knew it.

"I'll allow you relief again soon enough, *mi dulce gatita*, but not until you've learned and accepted from here on out that I'm your master, the man who will decide your fate and whether you live or die."

He smacked me long and hard until I had no fight left in me, tears flowing easily. Something inside of me screamed that I was going to die no matter how I reacted. I was paying for whatever treachery Tristen had done to this man. As the sickening feeling of desire mixed with the explosion of additional anguish, I shoved my mind into a safe place, pretending this wasn't happening. Unfortunately, the vibrations dancing through me prevented my mind or my body

from escaping from the penance the bastard believed I deserved. Every touch of his hand, every time he breathed across my heated skin, I was shoved further into a vacuum, incapable of thinking rationally.

Every guttural sound he made was dark and devious, but the tone remained intense and sultry, keeping my senses electrified. When I finally managed to ignore the crazy rush of desire, my rational mind returned. He'd never let me go. I might never know what happened between the two men, and I was beginning to think I didn't want to learn. However, there was no doubt that when Alessandro was finished with his sick game, I'd be tossed into the trash.

That wouldn't be with my help. I might as well do everything I could to get the hell out of his clutches. The moment he pulled his leg away, acting as if the round of discipline was over, I lunged off his lap, darting toward the door, not bothering to look back. I managed to grab my phone before sprinting toward the back door of my little house. I didn't care I was naked, completely vulnerable. I would bang on doors until someone let me in. I would hide until morning if necessary. Then I'd bring the son of a bitch down. I slapped my fingers around the handle, prepared to yank it open.

Then I felt his presence behind me. Suddenly, he was within inches, hovering over me like a barbarian ready to capture its prey.

At first, he did nothing, said nothing, merely keeping me from opening the door. Then he pressed his hand over mine, squeezing my fingers with enough pressure that I released my hold. As he wrapped both arms around me, crossing them over my breasts, I took several shallow breaths.

“That wasn't very nice of you, and I believed that we were getting along so well. Perhaps you were fooling me during our conversations, only pretending that you longed to have me standing by your bed, ready to ravish your luscious body.”

Even though his words were completely insane, the rich, husky tone of his voice enveloped me like a warm blanket,

creating an illusion of comfort and protectiveness. “You’re crazy. I could never want you.”

“Your body begs to differ, Sierra, just like the moment I placed my lips against your clit. Your nipples are rock hard, and the scent of your desire tells no lies.”

“You horrible fuck.”

He wrapped his hand around my throat, caressing so gently I could be easily lulled into a moment of sweet release, but I could tell what the bastard was capable of.

“Call me what you want. That doesn’t change the fact a debt needs to be repaid.” He rolled his fingers down my chest, the tips barely touching my skin. I was electrified all over, white-hot heat coursing through me. Every word he said dripped of innuendos, all of them filthy and rough. And a part of me craved exactly what he was alluding to.

No. No! Hell, no.

I refused to allow this to happen.

“If you’re going to kill me, just fucking do it.”

He pressed his mouth against my ear, his whisper far too sensual. “If I wanted you to die, sweet kitten, you would no longer be breathing.” He rubbed my stomach before placing his hand between my legs, pressing his fingers against my swollen folds. “I prefer spending quality time with you and that begins now.”

I was breathless with excitement yet horrified and another rush of embarrassment coursed through me. “There’s nothing you can do that will bother me.” I heard the cavalier tone in my voice and cringed, anticipating additional punishment.

“That’s all I needed to hear. Now, I fuck you, something I’ve longed to do since the moment you answered the phone.” He wrapped his hand around my hair, dragging me backward then pushing me over the kitchen table.

I couldn’t speak. There were no words entering my mind.

“Either I can continue sharing in the joys of our delicious, forbidden romance, or I can provide you with painful

reminders of your place. The choice is entirely up to you. Either you learn to obey me, or our time spent together will be extremely unpleasant. Do you understand me, Sierra?"

I wanted to claw out his eyes for using my name over and over again. Every syllable was grating, driving a sharp point into my brain, but I was smart enough to know the only possible way of getting out of his clutches was to agree.

As long as I could stomach the horror.

"Yes."

"Good girl," he growled, the tone sending a flutter of butterflies into my stomach.

As I heard the sound of his zipper being pulled, I wrapped my fingers around the edge of the table. How had I enjoyed any moment of our conversations, including the ones at the bistro? I'd been blinded by loneliness, hungering for the passionate touch of a man. In other words, I had been an idiot for not trusting my judgment.

I continued to tremble, trying to think of anything that would have led me to believe Tristen had been working with a monster. What I hated to say to myself was that I hadn't known him very well, not enough to be certain this man wasn't lying. Tristen's work had taken him up and down the East Coast as well as to other countries, which was why he'd maintained his residence in Atlanta while I remained in North Carolina. Had I been such a fool not to see his lies?

My mind shifted to what little I knew about the mafia family. They weren't just powerful, they controlled portions of several states with iron fists, and they were known for their heightened level of brutality. The words said from the dark stranger on the other end of the line should have been a red flag. No, they should have been a bomb ready to go off, but I'd ignored all the warnings. Why?

"I know what you need, sweet kitten, and I'll give you a small taste of what you can come to expect. If you remain obedient." Why did his voice have to be so alluring, drawing me into the same enchanting world he'd described only two hours before?

Fuck you. Fuck you straight to hell. I didn't dare say the words out loud for fear of angering him all over again.

Remain compliant. Do what he says. You can get through this. Even saying the words in my mind didn't squash the tingling in my body or its utter betrayal. My pussy remained wet, slickening the insides of my thighs.

"I will never want you."

"You can lie to yourself if you want, but I heard the desire in your voice, the excitement that increased every single time I called. You belonged to me the moment you picked up the phone for the first time."

He meant what he said. The man believed that he could take what he wanted without recourse.

Alessandro rolled his fingers down my spine, patting one side of my bottom then the other. When he kicked my legs apart, I was forced onto my toes. I clung to the table as if it could shield me from what was about to happen. When he pressed the tip of his cock against my wetness, I tensed.

"Relax, sweet kitten. I promise I won't hurt you, only provide you with the kind of pleasure you've hungered for and no man before me has been able to provide."

His arrogance was to be expected, but it riled me, and I pushed up from the table. "You will never break me."

"Breaking you won't be nearly as much fun as what I have in mind. One day very soon, all you'll be able to think about will be my touch and how it makes you feel. Only then will you truly belong to me. I will celebrate that day, savoring every moment of your full and complete surrender."

He pressed his cock inside, hesitating for only a few seconds before thrusting the entire length deep into my aching pussy.

I gasped, lights and stars floating in front of my eyes as my muscles stretched, trying to accommodate his huge girth. I was shocked as another wave of sensations tickled every one of my nerves, lighting me on fire as no man had ever done before.

“Uh. Oh, God. Oh...” My pants were primal, my starved-for-attention body and mind yanking the brazen woman from the dark catacombs of my being. Electric sensations rocked my body, sizzling every inch. Another patch of stars floated around my eyes, only they were colorful, sparkling as if this was the best thing in the world. I hated myself that the vibrations continued to increase, making it far too easy to surrender. When I slammed my hand on the table, he chuckled as darkly as he had before, the sound enticing me even more.

As he dug his fingers into my hips, tattooing me with his brand, I tried to shut my reaction down, but it wasn't that simple. His husky growls were cries of satisfaction, his breath just as ragged as mine. “You're tight. So fucking tight.”

I was crazed from the burning desire, tossing my head back and forth.

He smacked my bottom several times in rapid succession then pulled me away from the table, swirling his finger around my clit. “That's it, my sweet kitten. Take all of me. Every. Single. Inch.”

“I'm not your kitten.”

“You'll be exactly what I want you to be.”

He was so sure of himself, pulling out then slamming into me again. And again. He fisted my hair as he'd done before, digging his fingers into my scalp, yanking me into a deep arch. The force he used was brutal, driving me into the edge of the table, the mixture of pain and pleasure sending bottle rockets off in every cell. My blood was on fire, scorched from the savage way he was fucking me.

“I can tell you want to come, my Sierra. On this night, you can take all you want.”

On this night. He had plans for me, ones that he'd thought about for months, teasing me with his velvet voice, spinning my mind out of control. I bit my lip to keep from whimpering, doing everything I could not to give him a single moment of satisfaction.

But it was no use.

As the orgasm roared through me, a tidal wave sweeping into my system, my core turned into lava. If he felt a moment of fulfillment, it obviously wasn't enough. He thrust hard and fast, the rhythm unlike anything I'd ever experienced. As a single climax spiraled into another, echoes of his body slamming against mine were the only thing I could concentrate on.

"Oh. Oh. Oh!" No longer able to hold back my cries of passion, I heard his heavy sigh seconds before he smacked my bottom again. Then I sensed his body tensing.

I closed my eyes, a single tear slipping past my lashes, furious that I'd given him exactly what he'd wanted.

My release.

But the bastard would never have my surrender.

My muscles continued to clamp and release, finally squeezing around his cock involuntarily. When his body jerked, I realized he'd erupted deep inside, filling me with his seed.

He kept his fingers tangled in my hair, easing me to a standing position. Then he whispered words in my ear that would haunt me for the rest of my life.

"This is just the beginning, *mi dulce gatita*."

CHAPTER 2



*S*ierra

Five months earlier

“Hello?” I whispered, jarred from a deep sleep, my mind spinning from being yanked out of an ugly dream.

“I’ve been thinking about you.”

The deep baritone was startling, pulling me from the haze of sleep. The caller’s tone was also commanding. I sat up, tugging the sheets tightly against my body, shadows forming in every corner of the room from the slender sliver of moonlight. I was groggy, uncertain I heard the words correctly. “Who is this?”

After taking a deep breath, he chuckled, the sound dark and sensual. Immediately, goosebumps drifted along my arms, my heart skipping several beats.

“An admirer and you are my salvation, *mi dulce gatita*.”

“What?” I struggled to flip on the light on the nightstand, unable to find the switch.

“You’re a beautiful woman and you should be cherished. There is much we can do together.”

Who was this person? As I tried to recognize the man’s voice, I huddled close to the headboard. “I don’t who you are or how

you got this number, but I'm hanging up now."

"Enjoy your sleep, my sweet Sierra. And know this. Soon, I *will* be coming for you. Then you'll belong to me."

* * *

The phone rang and I jumped.

I knew who was calling. There was no doubt in my mind. I tried to block the sound, but thoughts about the past immediately pushed into the forefront of my mind.

I'd been told that grief manifested itself in several ways, not just emotionally but often with a severe physical response that couldn't be fully explained. Even after all these years, a single thought regarding Tristen's death could shove me into a fog, my mind unable to shift into a rational state, acknowledging that it had been almost four years. Four years...

I should be over what happened by now, but since the moment the police officer had called, I'd had a nagging feeling, a tiny blip of something in the back of my mind that refused to vanish. The details surrounding Tristen's death had been vague, off somehow. Only when I was able to exorcise whatever demons still existed would I ever be whole again. That's what my best girlfriends had told me the week after the accident. They'd said it again a few months later.

After all this time, they'd started to chastise me for never breaking free of the chains that continued to drag me into my pitch-black moods, keeping me from going on with my life. I had tried to move on, working long hours in order to fulfill what my mother had first called a silly dream.

To own a cozy neighborhood bookstore that served wine and some of the finest cheeses and other delicacies from around the world. With Tristen's help, I'd managed to expand, completing a dream that I'd had since before college. I loved what I'd accomplished in a few years and would relish every day except for one thing.

The expansion had come at a significant price.

Tristen's life.

When the ringing stopped, I took a deep breath, loathing the fact I was trembling. Ignoring the call wasn't going to make the person on the other end of the line disappear. I knew it was him. *Him*. The three little letters evoked an entirely different set of emotions. Strangely enough, the dark stranger's voice alone had pitched me into unwanted and unexpected territory.

Desire.

How was it possible I felt any kind of longing for someone I would never meet and who obviously had no intention of telling me his real identity? I shuddered at the thought, yanking the sheets under my chin as I glanced at the clock.

Seconds later, my cellphone started ringing again. A lump formed in my throat, not necessarily from fear but from anxiety laced with excitement. I had to be out of my mind to consider answering it.

I stared at the phone, reaching for it as if by instinct, but terrified because the conversation would venture into something deeper that I was positive I couldn't handle.

Him. *Him...*

A single bead of perspiration trickled down the side of my forehead, my body quivering.

Don't answer it. Don't do it. Call the police.

That's what I should do. The rational side of me knew better than to feed the asshole's fantasies, but there was something about his voice that I found irresistible. I also wanted to find out why the man had targeted me.

So, instead of doing the right thing, I answered, only this phone call would be on my terms.

"What the hell do you want, asshole? Know that this phone call is being recorded."

There was nothing but silence on the other end of the line for at least a minute. I was ready to hang up until I heard his deep exhale.

“Do you enjoy playing games, Sierra?”

“Not with sons of bitches who refuse to tell me who they are and what they want.” I sensed I’d angered him. Too fucking bad. “I’m hanging up now and if you ever consider calling me again, I will hunt you down.”

“I don’t think you really want to do that, Sierra. Do you? I sensed how much you enjoyed our previous conversation. I did as well. Are you ready to release your inhibitions?”

“Are you out of your mind? I don’t know who you are, but this is sick.”

When he laughed, butterflies formed in my stomach, their wings managing to touch the most intimate parts of my body. “Did you enjoy our previous conversation?”

How the hell could I, asshole? “I don’t know you. That doesn’t bode well for enjoyment on any level.”

“But I know you.”

The pause on the other end of the line sent a trickle of fear coursing through my blood. Had I met this man before? Was he a friend of Tristen’s? “Then tell me who I am.” Perhaps daring the stranger wasn’t a good idea, but I was tenacious, refusing to back down from anything.

“I know you’re hurting inside, the grief threatening to consume what hasn’t already been taken. I know you long to break free of the prison you’ve placed yourself in, finding joy and passion when all you’ve felt is sorrow. I also know your thoughts, dreams that you’ve had for years, but more important, I’ve sensed the longing furrowed deep inside, clawing at your skin, famished for a heated touch, a languishing kiss. Tell me I’m wrong, Sierra.”

Everything this... asshole described was true. I sucked in my breath, trying to make sense of why he was calling me. To torment me? He was twisted. How had he found me? How in God’s name had he gotten my phone number?

“Just... leave me alone. You know nothing about me.” I sensed his irritation I hadn’t accepted his forward advance and

relished the fact that some unknown prick was paying attention to me. Well, fuck him.

“Tell me, my sweet kitten. Is your pussy wet from the sound of my voice? Are your nipples hard, aching to be touched?”

That’s it. I’d had it.

“You are a sick, twisted fuck.” But he was right. I shifted my legs, my pussy throbbing as it had five days ago after his second call. He’d asked me questions on the second one, nothing too personal, yet I’d felt almost as if he’d reached through the phone, able to brush his fingers down my neck, rolling them between my breasts, teasing me gently.

Seducing me.

And he’d called me his *dulce gatita* after tucking me into bed.

It was crazy. I had to be insane to think of this as anything other than what was really happening. He was stalking me, but I could swear he didn’t have the intention of hurting me. Maybe I was a fool and nothing else.

“Yes, I am,” he growled. “I make no apologies for it. Answer me a single additional question and I’ll leave you for the night. Do you crave the darkness, a hunger that exists deep inside of you, spilling from your nightly fantasies into your dull, thankless life? Do you hunger for a taste of the uncontrollable, a feeling of ultimate freedom?”

I opened my mouth to retort, to tell him to go straight to hell, but his questions struck a chord deep inside, yanking at the unraveling mesh surrounding me. He’d sensed I’d been desperately trying to contain needs that could never be fulfilled. Exhaling, I closed my eyes, sliding my hand underneath the bodice of my nightgown, rolling my finger around my nipple. “Yes.” The word escaped, whispered to a man I didn’t know for a reason I couldn’t understand.

But the moment of utter freedom was exquisite.

Then I ended the call.

I would never talk to him again.

Or so I prayed...

* * *

Ten days later

It had been a perfect night, more than I could have ever hoped for. Between convincing the town's most famous romance author to host a signing event at the bistro while managing to snag several cases of the 2007 vintage, Castillo Ygay Gran Reserva Especial Tinto red wine, I knew I should be on cloud nine. Sales had been through the roof of both books and vino.

Beautiful people from several walks of life had attended, if only for a few minutes at a time. I'd even garnered a spot on the local evening news, and I'd managed not to come off wide-eyed and out of my element. Yes, I should be explosively happy, eager to drink champagne and celebrate several years of trying to get Corks and Books off the ground.

Sadly, I remained apprehensive, glancing at every shadow, pacing the floor as I counted steps and breaths. That wasn't like me. I'd never allowed fear to overcome my everyday life.

"You've been tense all day, boss. What gives?"

Brittany was a joy to be around, her laughter the first thing that drew me to her just before I'd hired her. Tonight, every sound she made grated on my nerves. But she wasn't to blame for my anxiety, and the long day and delivery problems hadn't helped my bad mood. "I'm fine."

"Sure you are." She eyed me as if I had two heads while she continued to wipe down the cheese counter.

"Why don't you take off? I'm fine closing by myself."

Her eyes brightened. I'd seen her boyfriend peering in the front window at least twice during her shift. "Are you sure?"

If the girl said 'sure' one more time, I wasn't certain I could keep from berating her. God, that wasn't like me. "I'm positive." I offered a thin smile, my thoughts drifting to three nights before, just like they had throughout the day. And the

day before. The sound of his voice continued to tickle my ears, his husky tone penetrating the deep, dark areas within my body.

I'd had six calls from the dark stranger, enough that I was usually correct in anticipating when they'd occur, although here was no exact timing, the days random, the hours all over the place. The last call had been in the morning just after I'd gotten out of the shower. Draped in a towel, I'd answered the call, my skin tingling with anticipation.

Biting my lower lip, I squeezed my pussy muscles just thinking about our intimate conversations. He'd evoked so many feelings, his deep baritone soothing away typical fears that I should feel. Sighing, I shifted my attention away, swallowing the lump in my throat. However, it was almost no use reminding myself the man was nothing but a stalker. I enjoyed our heated conversations more than I should.

That made me completely insane.

My employee was like a live wire, dancing her way to the back room. I could hear her humming from where I remained, staring out the front window into the darkness. Barely seconds later, she flew by me, stopping only after she'd opened the front door.

"Thanks, boss. I owe you one."

I had to laugh. At least the girl had a man who adored her.

As soon as the door eased shut, I headed toward it, engaging the lock. As I placed my back against it, I couldn't help but shake my head given the ridiculous situation. A stranger had managed to derail my world for over a month.

As I closed my eyes, a vision of the man behind the make-believe voice shifted into my mind. He was gorgeous, tall and buff with broad shoulders and sculpted muscles everywhere. I pressed my fingers against my mouth, furious with myself for envisioning a stalker as anything but the malevolent force he was. Not that I'd noticed anyone standing outside my house or the bistro, but there was no other word to adequately describe his insane behavior.

Or the fact that he knew my name.

I'd been around the block more than a few times in my thirty-four years. Whoever the asshole was had likely found my name on my website. Maybe he'd enjoyed a glass of wine while he sat in the back corner of the store fantasizing about me. Whatever the case, the fantasy manufactured in my mind should be placed in the outrageous category. As soon as the second call had been completed, I'd managed to turn on the light, staring at the screen for almost five minutes.

Blocked.

The fucker didn't want me to discover who he was. It wasn't a random prank. I'd sensed a knowing, as if he'd studied me. Watched me.

Hungered for me.

Every inch of my body tingled, a feeling of sheer delirium drifting through my mind.

Push it aside.

Determined to get home in order to indulge in a glass of wine and a bubble bath, I turned off the front lights, heading behind the counter. I grabbed the last few items, my hands full when I heard my phone ring.

At first, I bristled. Then I remembered my bestie had warned me she'd call. Warn was the perfect word. She'd been berating me for several weeks to accept her invitation for a night out on the town. As I juggled grabbing my phone and trying to arrange the prize-winning blue cheese wheels I'd sold my soul to have delivered from Denmark, I didn't bother looking at the screen.

“Right on time, Clarice, but the answer is still no.” *Push yourself. Go out. Pretend your life didn't come crashing down almost four years ago.* “Okay. Maybe I will join you tonight but only for one drink. I know how you get. I have a very busy day tomorrow.”

The silence was eerie, my heart instantly thumping irregularly. When I heard a slight, husky sigh, I sucked in my breath. Oh,

my God. I was frozen, unable to breathe or think clearly. “Is someone there?”

I felt him, as if his fingers were dancing across my skin. The same vision of the man pulsed in the back of my mind. His eyes. His face. His smile.

His stunning physique.

“You were expecting someone else.” His voice was just as dark as it had been every night, far too seductive in tone. There was a hint of disappointment, as if I’d not only be expecting but want another call from him. The strange thing was that the fear I’d experienced the first night had faded away completely.

I pushed the cheese onto the stainless-steel table in the back, trying to control my breathing. The dark stranger had made me question far too much about myself. The grief. The guilt. The anger that remained. The loneliness. God, I’d never felt so lonely in my life. I had good friends, women that had held me up, who’d consumed far too much tequila when I’d fallen down my rabbit hole of despair. I had several amazing employees and parents who doted on me far too much.

But the moment the clock struck midnight at least three times a week, I’d fallen into a black hole. I longed for a warm touch, a brush of callused fingers dancing down my arm and the tickling sensations of having a man’s lips nip my earlobe while sliding his hand under the hem of my nightgown. I’d craved a man’s firm hold as he drove his cock deep inside, fucking me long and hard until we were both left exhausted, consumed by a state of bliss. He’d pulled out my most vulnerable thoughts, revealing a part of me I never wanted to see the light of day.

Why? Why had this complete stranger managed to drive me to the point of seeking out a one-night stand, just to feel alive again? Just once? I had no rational answers because I was obviously in an entirely different kind of erotic fog. I wouldn’t dare tell my besties what was going on. They’d think I’d completely lost my mind.

Yet the sound of his voice alone evoked the same dark and filthy desires that I’d tried desperately hard to shove aside.

“My best friend.” I blurted out the words for no other reason than nervousness.

“If only it was possible to join you tonight, my sweet, talented, and very beautiful Sierra. That would be the highlight of my day. I would so enjoy finally being able to touch your soft skin, to whisper words that provide you with an understanding of my desires.”

“Desires? You don’t...” Why bother? Saying he didn’t know me seemed irrelevant at this point. I had to fight this, to end whatever *this* was before I completely lost all capability of maintaining normalcy.

“Yes, deep and dark desires.”

The rumble of his voice sent a tremor straight to my core. I almost tripped on a box in my effort to steady myself against the wall. I took a deep breath, refusing to acknowledge his compliment. His voice was like warm chocolate, sinful, and my mind floated to several filthy thoughts. *What are you doing?* I had to end the charade somehow. “What do you ultimately want? A date? You’ve been calling me for weeks, acting as if you knew me.” I laughed nervously, realizing seconds later I’d shifted my hand to my breasts, aimlessly flicking my finger back and forth across my already hardened nipples.

“Want? I think you mean what is it that I need like the air in order to breathe. Unfortunately, the question is best answered when I have a better opportunity to provide a comprehensive flow of words. You deserve no less. You deserve everything. You are that special to me, Sierra.”

Special. Everything.

His words were meant to tempt me into doing something stupid.

Was this asshole kidding me? Tonight I allowed myself to become furious that some son of a bitch thought he could interrupt my life, acting as if we knew each other. “Who are you? If you honestly think we’re going to continue these...

ridiculous conversations, then I deserve to know your name.”
At least my tone had sounded as demanding as I’d wanted.

“As I told you from the first night. An admirer. I’m a man who enjoys engaging in acts of passion.”

“You mean domination. Sadism.”

His laugh was entirely different than I was used to, as if I’d unlocked one of his great mysteries. “You do understand, and do you want to know why our conversations intrigue you?”

Hell fucking no. That wasn’t the truth. I closed my eyes, trying to keep the rational side of me in the forefront of my brain. “Fine. Let’s play your disgusting game. Why?”

“Because we’re cut from the same cloth. We hunger for the same things that only the darkest proclivities can provide. I’ll teach you, *mi dulce gatita*. Once you’ve been trained, you’ll revel in the opportunities.”

Opportunities. He made the offer sound appealing, which was in itself insane.

There was no reason for my palms to be sweaty, but I found myself pressing one then the other against my skirt. At the same time, I was trying to control my ragged breathing, refusing to allow the stranger to know I was bothered in the least. I’d had ‘admirers’ in various periods of my life, a few who refused to take no for an answer. At least initially. If I had to guess, I’d say the jerk with a velvet tongue had latched onto my picture from one of the trade publications, likely jacking off as he talked to me.

Strangely enough though, he didn’t seem the type. There was an intelligence to his voice even though our conversation had steered toward emotional and physical desires. For some crazy reason, that intrigued me. Still, I had to get him off the phone permanently. If I had to change numbers, then that’s what I’d do. If not, I wasn’t entirely certain I could resist his advances.

What the hell is wrong with you?

“Look, I appreciate your kind words and the sensual as well as inappropriate conversations, but I’d prefer if you’d never call me again. My boyfriend might become jealous.” I tried to

laugh, but the sound was dry, devoid of emotion. Angering him wasn't in my best interest.

He remained quiet, the few seconds ticking by allowing a knot to form in my stomach.

“There's no need to lie to me or to yourself, Sierra. However, I sense tonight isn't the best time for you to talk.”

Now I bristled. This had to stop.

“Perhaps I didn't make myself clear. There isn't a better time. I don't talk to strangers. Okay? Enjoy your night.” I hung up the phone before I allowed him to get any further under my skin.

Half laughing, I shoved my phone into my pocket, expecting the phone to ring again. The silence was strangely deafening. When it didn't ring after a few minutes, I yanked out my phone again, doing the same thing I'd done three nights before. Stare and wonder.

As a cold shiver drifted down my spine, I had no doubt he'd call again.

* * *

“Why am I your salvation?” I demanded as soon as I picked up the phone. Another three days had passed, his call waiting until after midnight. After chastising myself for allowing the calls to last for far too long, I'd made a nonemergency call to the police, curious as to what they could do. It would seem someone saying they were coming for me didn't register as a threat, let alone that the calls had been very short, likely untraceable. They'd encouraged me to change my number.

And watch my back.

“Do you not believe you're capable of delivering someone from the penalty of sin?”

I thought about his question and was curiously intrigued. “Engaging in sin is a personal choice. There is no one capable

of delivering anyone from the penalties required if the act is violent or heinous.”

“But what if it’s from indulgence in the art of dark proclivities?” There was a strange profoundness in his words, although I couldn’t put my finger on why.

“Then that would depend on if both parties are interested.” Why was I talking to him? This had turned from a stalker trying to get my attention to something far too personal. What if he knew where I lived?

“An excellent point, Sierra. However, it is often that someone doesn’t know what they need until they are forced into the experience. I’m certain you’ve realized that given our frank and delicious conversations.”

I dragged my tongue across my lips, realizing the discussion was going in a place that I couldn’t allow. “That would depend entirely on trust and there’s no chance I can trust you. None. Don’t fool yourself. This is all about getting your rocks off and I want no part of it any longer.” I felt a strange pull to the man, as if we were already connected. It was uncomfortable but at the same time exciting.

He laughed, deep and throaty, the huskiness of it coursing through my veins. “Trust is earned, my sweet. When it’s broken, there is often no ability to reconnect the electricity a second time. There’s only a need for an entirely different level of satisfaction.”

“Meaning what?”

“Meaning there is a very thin line between love and hate. I hope our relationship doesn’t reach that point.”

I swallowed, moving toward the front room, the darkness luring me to the window overlooking the busy street. There were enough lights from other businesses and overhead to give me a pristine view of the area. Sadly, with the number of people going in and out of restaurants and bars, it was impossible to tell whether anyone was watching the bistro. Maybe if I got his name, I’d have more luck with the police.

“You have the advantage of knowing my name, but I don’t know yours. That doesn’t seem fair in an effort to build trust.”

“You are highly intelligent, Sierra, a woman who thrives on being organized, everything in its place. However, you also crave the darkness, someone who will guide you through the vast emporium of unbridled desire. My name is not important, only what I offer.”

I closed my eyes, loathing the way my body reacted, my nipples fully aroused, the thin lace of my bra adding to the aching and need. “And what are you offering?”

He hesitated, his breathing labored. “Rapture.”

With that, the call was dropped.

* * *

“I finally wore you down,” Clarice said, although the tone of her voice reminded me of a purring kitten. She oozed sex appeal in her attire and mannerisms, drawing every male’s attention the moment she walked into a room. I’d never been so self-confident, unless it was about business.

I’d buried myself in the success of Corks and Books, even though in the back of my mind I’d known it was nothing more than a way of keeping my mind active. Avoidance, my friends had called it. ‘Refusal to engage in a life you deserve to live,’ I’d heard more than once.

“I wanted to come to dinner,” I assured them, glaring at Dierdre when she laughed. One week had passed since I’d heard from the dark stranger. Every minute of those seven days I’d wondered if or when he’d call again. Every phone call I’d received I’d jumped nearly out of my skin, breathless with anticipation. What was disturbing was that I’d been disappointed when I hadn’t seen a blocked number appear on the screen.

“Girlfriend, do you remember the last time we were out together?” Clarice asked as she swirled her margarita, her eyes constantly roaming the man candy in the restaurant. My friend

had purposely selected the spot noted in the latest *Raleigh City Life* magazine as the hot and happening pickup spot in the city. They'd been trying to fix me up with whatever Tom, Dick, or Harry they thought would be a good fit.

I'd been on seven blind dates in two years, every one of them at their insistence.

"I remember," I huffed, yanking the margarita into my hand, sloshing some over the side. "Okay, so it was three months ago."

The two women looked at each other and laughed. "Try seven," Clarice corrected.

I rolled my eyes but realized they were right. I needed to get out more, even if only with friends.

"We need to find you one hot stud, at least for a single night," Dierdre added.

As I leaned over the table, I slowly glanced from one to the other. "Let me think. Who was the last perfect stud? Oh, yes. Jonathan. Wasn't that his name? An accountant for whatever large firm. I honestly never believed accountants enjoyed talking numbers, but that's what he did through the entire dinner. And the man wore suspenders."

Clarice huffed. "Okay, so maybe he wasn't your type."

"Wasn't my type? He had his life planned out. A wife by age thirty-six. Three kids by thirty-nine. I envisioned the white picket fence, for God's sake. That's not me." After I realized my voice had increased in volume and several diners were looking in our direction, all three of us burst into laughter. "Then there was Mack, who was more interested in showing me his tattoos than finding out a single thing about me."

"But you have to admit, he would have been good for a hot stud muffin kind of night," Dierdre said with conviction in her voice.

"Uh-huh. My guess is he would have crushed me under his weight." It felt good to laugh, especially after the odd phone calls. At least I hadn't heard from the dark stranger for almost a week. Maybe he'd grown bored with me.

“I don’t care what you say. I’m going to point out sexy men until you cave in. You deserve a life. Besides,” Clarice said coyly, “you’re not getting any younger.”

She pulled back when I threatened to toss silverware in her direction. “You are a monstrous beast of a friend,” I hissed. We’d been friends for long enough we could read each other like a book, sharing everything.

Yet I hadn’t been able to share the recent calls with her and I wasn’t certain why.

“Radar. One hundred degrees south,” Dierdre said in her usual husky-sex-radar voice when she was attracted to a man, which happened everywhere we went. She lifted her glass, dragging her tongue through the salted rim as she stared at whoever she considered gorgeous.

I glanced over my shoulder, instantly uncomfortable. The man was staring at our table. No, his dark eyes were piercing mine. Butterflies formed in my stomach, and I couldn’t take my eyes off him. He was deliciously handsome, tall and dark with a rough and tumble physique. Dressed in black jeans and a tee shirt that accentuated his muscular physique, he commanded a presence in the room, every woman watching the way he took several sips of his drink.

“He’s okay,” I muttered.

“Just okay?” Dierdre challenged. “Girl, you need to get your eyes checked. One hot man. I could only imagine what his cock looks like, long and thick.”

“Dierdre!” I admonished but laughed again. She had no filter, but I loved that about her.

“What?”

Clarice shook her head. “It’s interesting. He’s watching us.”

“Sadly, not us,” Dierdre pouted. “Our stick in the mud friend.”

I playfully punched her arm. “You’re terrible.” When my phone rang I tensed, then remembered I’d reminded Brittany to call me if there were any issues with the late shipment of

books. That had been occurring far too often lately. When I yanked my cellphone from my purse, a moan escaped.

“Is something wrong?” Clarice asked.

Seeing the blocked number, I shuddered, tingling all over. This had to end and I was the only one who could stop it.

Do you really want it to end? Don't you want to hear his voice again? The inner nagging was driving me as crazy as the intimate phone calls. Worse was the truthful answer and it continued to sicken me.

“No, just a call I need to take.”

Why are you answering? Why? My inner voice had been asking the same question at least twice a day. I had no logical answer.

“Don't be too long or Mr. Throbbing Cock might look elsewhere.” Dierdre's tease barely registered as I got up from the table, moving toward the hallway leading to the bathrooms. Then I gathered up my courage, making a final decision. The twisted game had to end. Period. When I answered the call, I made certain my tone of voice left no question as to my desires.

The sick pervert thought he knew me so well.

“It would seem you didn't understand me before. I'm not interested in talking with you any longer. Stop calling or trust me, I will make certain to share the trail I've found leading to you. I doubt you want the police showing up on your doorstep.” The quietness on the other end was more unnerving than before. While there was conviction in my voice, I almost gave away the lie by following the controlled soliloquy with a whimper.

“I know you better than you think I do, Sierra. You're ignited by the possibilities, filthy thoughts fueling your every desire, filtering into your mind when you least expect it,” he said in a commanding tone, sultry and sinful.

“You don't know me at all.”

“Then that will need to change. Patience, my sweet Sierra. Soon, you will learn that all good things come in time.”

“You need to stop this. I’m changing my number.”

As he’d done so many times before, he laughed, the sound penetrating to my core, another wave of tingles shifting into my aching pussy. My panties were damp, my mind blurred as the fine line he’d mentioned before continued to crack, drifting from one side to the other. “Do you really believe that will stop me from securing what already belongs to me?”

“That’s it. I’m calling the police.”

“Don’t anger me, Sierra. You won’t like the punishment you receive if you do. I will not contact you again. But know this. Soon, you will be in my arms and when you are, you’ll be forced to surrender.”

When he ended the call, I leaned against the wall, trying to process his warning. It wasn’t so much a threat, but a promise of things to come.

Evil, vile, and seductive things.

Why was I quivering all over from the thought?

After a few seconds, I ran my hand through my hair and was able to return to the restaurant. I immediately glanced toward the man near the bar who’d been watching me.

Just as he was ending a call. Was it possible he was the man on the other end of the phone or was I jumping to conclusions? When he turned his head toward me, locking eyes with mine, a sickening feeling pooled in my stomach. His intense gaze remained. My instinct had never failed me. He was the caller.

At least I had a face to a voice.

How long before he came for me?

CHAPTER 3



“*If an injury has to be done to a man, it should be so severe that his vengeance need not be feared.*”

—*Niccolo Machiavelli*

Alessandro

Three months later

I shouldn't have allowed the fact that Sierra was stunning to interfere with my original plans, but it already had. She had the kind of ethereal beauty that only existed in magazines, the photographer capturing the luminescent qualities capable of selling French perfume or expensive Italian sports cars. Yet her eyes held a haunted quality, a telling of the difficulties in her life. Perhaps that was the real appeal, her fragile state of mind calling to the beast deep inside. Whatever the case, I no longer wanted to simply make her pay for the sins of another.

Instead, I wanted to possess her, carving out a place in my world where I could protect her innocence.

Even from a bastard like me.

I'd tested my patience, allowing her to believe she was free of the man who'd awakened her senses, carving a place inside her soul. My tolerance had almost reached an end. Just thinking about fulfilling my promise to her aroused every one

of my senses. My desire was unexpected but refused to be denied.

The one piece of advice my father had shared over the years was never to mix business with pleasure, but with her, it was next to impossible. She'd become my obsession and nothing on earth would dissuade my decision to capture and keep her as my own.

Sadly, every time I allowed my mind to hunger for the forbidden, my thoughts drifted to the treacherous son of a bitch who'd stolen a good portion of my life, along with hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Vengeance.

The act of inflicting punishment or retribution for an injury or wrong.

I laughed as I thought about the plan that was on the precipice of exploding, the vile yet pleasurable game that I'd put into motion months before and my cock twitched. For years, I'd enjoyed the act of violence, appreciating the frailty of human bodies, the strong becoming the weak within minutes. I'd had the joy of watching the most powerful men fall to their knees, begging for their lives and those of their loved ones. I'd seen them as pathetic, weak links in a world where only the strongest survived. My father had taught me to ignore the rules of society, which had led me to becoming less than human.

A monster.

Or so I'd been called more than once.

My penchant for shedding blood had provided me with a solid reputation, which in turn had kept the majority of my enemies at bay. Then the shit had hit the fan, breaking a stronghold that had been in place for two generations. The Montenegro family had suffered, our empire tarnished.

Because of a single act of recklessness on my part, I'd spent four years locked away, treated like nothing more than an animal. Being incarcerated had taken a significant toll, hardening my resolve, enticing my bloodlust. More significantly, the time spent locked away with only my filthy

thoughts to keep me company had altered my mindset, fueling an entirely different intensity of hunger. The only satisfaction I'd found was in tasting the luscious woman from afar.

Some would call me crazy for engaging in a dangerous affair, if only by vicarious methods. The truth was that my original intentions had been to terrorize, not to seduce, but I'd found myself unable to pull away, longing to follow through with the suggestions I'd provided, her receptiveness surprising me.

My hunger knew no bounds. I was used to getting everything I wanted. But this was... different, a drug that I required in order to thrive. My thoughts continuously drifted to visions of Sierra's naked body covered in marks created by my hand. I flexed my fingers, the tips tingling as I envisioned myself providing the discipline she sorely needed.

She'd already submitted to me mentally. Soon, I would take the rest.

I'd remained quiet when I was escorted from the prison, trying to recapture the feeling of freedom while anger swelled from deep inside.

I hadn't been surprised reporters had been waiting for me to walk outside, curious to catch a glimpse of the monster leaving the atrocity of his cage. However, I had been somewhat astounded by the tenacity of the questions that had been thrown at me.

"Mr. Montenegro, do you intend on seeking revenge?"

"Mr. Montenegro, have you repented for your crimes?"

"Alessandro. Are you aware the FBI has been investigating additional information discovered regarding several murders occurring at the time of your arrest? Do you believe their sudden increased interest is a result of your early release from prison?"

The single question had stopped me in my tracks almost as soon as I'd walked out of the prison gates. I'd smoothed down my jacket and walked toward the beautiful blonde with eyes highlighting the hatred she had for a bastard like me. My

answer had been curt, on point, even as I'd seethed deep inside.

"I will enjoy any and all discussions with the FBI and look forward to learning more about their discovery."

My smirk had obviously been caught on camera, my invitation something the FBI wouldn't ignore. Then Matteo, my Capo, had pushed the horde way, allowing me to slide inside the waiting SUV.

Matteo Rivera had remained loyal. He'd been working for me since the tender age of seventeen. His grin said it all. He knew I was back, ready to tackle every obstacle.

Several minutes passed and I sensed that Edwardo—the man responsible for my early release—was enveloped in fear, uncertain of my future actions. Good.

"What the fuck other information was the reporter talking about?" I asked my family attorney quietly. Edwardo Francesco been with the family for years and was considered one of my father's most trusted allies. At this point, I trusted no one.

However, I was beginning to question his loyalty. Maybe he needed a stern reminder that I was now in charge of the organization.

"The FBI have been snooping around, but there's nothing concrete. They've wanted to take your family down for years," he answered.

"Which is why the loose ends should have been handled after my arrest." While the man responsible for turning state's evidence was supposedly dead, he hadn't worked alone. That meant until those traitors were hunted down like dogs and handled, there was always a chance additional charges could be filed. I'd suspected the bastard who'd turned against me had secured and hidden away information, but I was unable to interrogate the man.

Or so I'd been led to believe.

I'd heard dead people told no tales, but I was betting that man was wallowing in both money and still breathing air, provided

with a new life for betraying me. And for stealing a significant sum of money from my organization.

“Cruz determined it wasn’t wise and your father agreed with him.”

I laughed in response. My younger brother didn’t have my backbone. “That’s bullshit and not the way we handle business.”

“Alessandro. The feds were watching everything, every action your father and brother made after your arrest. You went through that several times. You, of all people, should understand what the ramifications would have been if they’d found a single additional piece of evidence.”

While his statement made sense, that didn’t squelch my anger. Or my need for revenge.

The tension in the air could be cut with a spoon.

“Glad you’re back, boss,” Matteo said, although I didn’t acknowledge him, still processing parts of the plan. There was much to do before I altered Sierra’s life permanently.

While the cinder block walls of a prison hadn’t prevented me from partaking in several luxuries, I’d been unable to run my empire the way I was used to. I also had barely tolerated being unable to take what I wanted without fear of retribution.

My patience had nearly reached the end. At least Edwardo had managed to have my sentence reduced. But only after I’d explained to him exactly what I would do if he didn’t manage to put the fear of God into certain individuals who held the key to my freedom.

It was time to regain control of the crumbling empire left in my brother’s command. He was worthless in my mind, unable to keep the wolves at bay. I would break the cycle, taking back what belonged to me, using all methods of violence regardless of the consequences I’d been warned about more than once.

The fact that after four fucking years my brother still hadn’t managed to hunt down the other people responsible set a bad precedence. And it left a horrific taste in my mouth.

I'd spent years building a solid hold on New York City, taking my father's dream to another plateau. Long hours and the ability to think clearly had been of benefit, our territory expanding beyond my wildest dreams. My tireless efforts had paid off royally, the Montenegro name symbolizing power, placing alarm into every other syndicate who dared defy us.

We also owned a good portion of those in a different level of authority, which usually allowed my family and the men who worked for me protection from the law.

Then one fucking act of treason had changed everything.

The blame fell squarely on my shoulders for allowing a moment of trust, what my father had called a blatant error in judgment. I'd paid a significant price. Now I should have the joy of exacting revenge, taking my time to assist the individual in understanding that fucking with a man like me wasn't in his best interest.

But the asshole had died in a horrific crash. Bullshit.

I rubbed my finger across my lips as I stared out the side window. Something hadn't felt right from the moment I'd heard the news, but there was no scathing information that would lead me to believe the fucker wasn't rotting away six feet under the ground.

Except my instinct continued to tell me otherwise.

Whether or not he was a corpse, the fact remained that someone had to pay the price. I'd chosen the next best thing.

One beautiful unsuspecting woman.

"Yes. It will be good to get back to my life," I said absently. With time, everything was required to change, which was first on my list of things to do.

Take back what was mine.

Secure my place as king of the city.

Scrutinize everyone considered loyal, exterminating anyone I considered questionable.

Then...

“You know the drill, Alessandro. You need to lay low for a while.”

I shifted my gaze toward Edwardo and almost instantly he cringed from the weight of unsaid words.

“Do I need to remind you that you work for me, Edwardo?”

“Christ. You act as if nothing has changed during your time in prison. That’s bullshit. Somewhere inside you know it. The screws were tightened, your freaking empire almost falling apart. I did what I could to put a thumb in the dike, but Cruz wasn’t ready to accept the helm. I mean that with no disrespect.”

Uh-huh. I glared at him, taking several deep breaths. It wouldn’t bode well to rip him into shreds, even though my irritation was reaching that level of anger.

No, my brother was far too inexperienced. He was also a greedy son of a bitch, using our various contacts to grease his palm and pad his bank account instead of growing our respective businesses.

I noticed my Capo staring at me in the rearview mirror, anger in his dark eyes. He’d handled certain issues in my absence, his techniques almost as brutal as my own. He barely tolerated Edwardo and his almost righteous attitude while looking the other way when we’d handled business. His sneer almost made me chuckle.

“Everything changes, Edwardo,” I said absently as I allowed my thoughts to drift to Sierra. I’d toyed with her, tormenting the woman who likely held the key to providing the revenge I needed. If my instincts were right, using her would provide me with required relief.

In several ways.

I hadn’t intended on engaging in several carnal conversations, but the moment I’d heard the soft, sensual lilt of her voice, I’d hungered for more than just punishing her for guilt by association. Then I’d become addicted to our conversations, demanding Edwardo visit the prison more often than usual. With power came influence, and Edwardo had been able to

challenge the prison's rules and allow me to utilize his phone in order to continue the game.

His assistance was one of few reasons the man remained alive. His meddling and constant challenges were reaching a pinnacle that he really didn't want to cross.

"What are your plans?" Edwardo asked after I refused to provide an additional answer to his useless questions.

"Are you seriously questioning me?" I slowly turned my head in his direction again. He knew I was crazy enough to bloody the seats of my father's preferred SUV.

He did nothing but shake his head.

His silence allowed me to think more clearly. I had to play the game carefully or I'd lose my prize before I had a chance to taste it. I envisioned Sierra's face, imagined requiring her to be on her knees with her mouth wide open. I hungered to drive my cock deep inside, savoring the sounds as she gagged at first before allowing her throat to relax. And I envisioned spewing my load down her throat, her tongue licking me clean.

I was a sick man, but the game was far too enjoyable to ignore. I eased the file I'd required Edwardo to bring into my lap, opening the flap and glancing down at Sierra's picture. Her light blue eyes stared back at me from a photo that should have been used for a liquor or perfume commercial. They glittered silver as if they were coins reflecting the light of the sun in a wishing well.

I could imagine what her wish would be once she found out my plans.

Even her flaxen blonde hair had a warm glow, which made my fingers itch to fist her long strands at the scalp, yanking her into a deep arch as I fucked her from behind. She had legs that seemed to go on forever, an hourglass figure that would make any man ignore his responsibilities, his actions fueled by eternal lust.

Her beauty was a mere complement to her inner transcendent quality. At least that's what I'd gathered after gleaning as

much information about her as Edwardo had been able to find. She was quiet, reserved in her actions, spending her life pleasing others. Every time I looked into her eyes, I was mesmerized by her inner beauty. If this had been anyone else or any other time, I'd considered myself losing my grip on reality, but with her everything was different. My mother used to say love had the ability to transcend time. Now I wondered if it was possible to find a strong connection by looking at a single photograph.

What I knew was that the electricity had arced even through the phone.

I'd memorized every inch of her face and gorgeous body since the first minute I'd been handed the picture while still inside prison. That had escalated my plans, creating the need to contact her, which Edwardo had balked against. He learned quickly that going against my wishes wasn't in his best interest. He hadn't denied me again since then.

"Is this about the goddamn woman?" Edwardo asked. "She should be off limits. She's not a part of what happened four years ago. I checked her out, remember?"

I didn't give a shit what he'd discovered about her. Sierra Wynters would endure the brunt of my anger my way.

Needing Edwardo's assistance had allowed him to believe that he held some level of importance in my world. When I jammed my arm under his throat, pinning him to the plush leather seats, his eyes opened wide out of fear as well as respect.

"You will not mention her again. Not to me. Not to anyone. Do I make myself clear or should I demand Matteo pull over so I'm able to accentuate my order?"

Edwardo's face paled and he managed to shake his head even with my crushing hold.

"Good, because I'm not in the mood to get my hands dirty. At least not today. You should consider it your lucky day." No, today was about getting my shit together, removing my brother

from the helm then laying claim to what already belonged to me. However, that would take time.

At some point I'd need to handle the two men who'd helped the treacherous son of a bitch. I would enjoy every single minute of exacting revenge.

My cock twitched as I returned my sadistic thoughts to Sierra. Very few people had ever surprised me during my thirty-five years of existence. Not a single woman. While I'd enjoyed several females in my life on a temporary basis, none had brought me a sense of peace from unleashing my sadistic side.

Strangely enough, a few conversations on the phone with a stranger had proven to keep the darkness hovering just under the surface, my mouth watering at the thought of all the vile things I'd do once I had her in captivity. My balls were tight as drums and my visions of shackling her hands and feet were a delicious temptation.

Only I hungered to do far worse.

I shifted in my seat uncomfortably, rubbing my index finger across my lips as I tried to turn my attention to how I'd handle my brother. Cruz had always been difficult, making everything a competition between us. He'd assumed rule over the Montenegro syndicate before I'd been convicted, which had solidified the divide.

He wouldn't leave the helm without being shoved aside.

God help him if he dared attempt to fight me.

"Where to, boss?" Matteo asked.

"Cruz's house."

He eyed me again in the rearview mirror, lifting his eyebrows. At least he knew better than to question me.

"However, we'll drop Edwardo off at his office."

"You want me there when you speak to Cruz," Edwardo insisted.

"And why would that be?" I didn't give a shit what had transpired over the past four years. I'd been kept abreast of

every business deal, including the ones my brother had fucked up. I didn't need a play by play of a goddamn thing. That would likely anger me enough I'd be forced to garner some relief.

Very little calmed the rage inside of me.

Blood and brutal sex.

Often, they came together depending on the situation. I yanked the duffle bag of weapons Matteo had brought, selecting my favorite Sig Sauer and easing it into the interior pocket of my jacket. I continued to have a target on my back, enemies assuming I remained vulnerable. Edwardo watched my every move, cursing under his breath.

"He's handling things... differently than you are. I've already told you that," he insisted.

"Differently." I laughed, tossing him another vengeful look. "I'm curious, Edwardo. Why didn't you stop him?" He was uncomfortable with my question.

"Because your father wouldn't allow it."

"I find that interesting, Edwardo, since my father hasn't been in control for almost eight years."

It would seem he had a stranglehold around his neck. If he wasn't careful, I'd use it as a noose.

"No, but he has influence, more power than Cruz ever could. It was necessary that he intervene."

"Fascinating, including the fact I'm just now being told."

"You didn't need to face additional difficulties. You had enough of your own."

I shook my head. If he was referring to the fact that there'd been three unfortunate incidents where useless convicts had dared try to follow through with their assassination attempts, then he continued to underestimate me. I'd handled the separate episodes as if I hadn't been stuck behind bars.

All three of them bloody and final.

Perhaps it was time to see just how far Edwardo would hang himself to keep my father's loyalty in his front pocket. The man was paid very well for his counsel, even more for the criminal work he'd handled over the years.

Maybe creating additional bad blood wasn't in my best interest on day one, but as I'd been reminded more than once, I never played fair in life, business, war, or passion.

My brother had a posh condo in the heart of Manhattan, likening himself to a celebrity with the entourage that followed him everywhere. He was a playboy, enjoying the perks of affluence where I'd preferred and enjoyed the business and political aspects of growing our regime.

We were complete opposites, something our father had never failed to remind us of. It was his way of keeping the two of us in a blind competition, vying for power when we'd both known all along I'd take the helm after our father's retirement. While I'd grown weary of the constant issues prior to my incarceration, I felt revitalized at the thought of rekindling our brutal battles.

"I'll allow you to stay for the meeting, Edwardo, but I strongly suggest you remember your place," I told him as Matteo pulled into the secure garage.

"Don't threaten me, Alessandro. I was the only person who managed to keep you from enduring the full prison sentence handed down by the judge."

If he believed his tenuous place in my existence held any merit, he would soon learn that any misstep would result in his termination.

And not just from his position within our organization.

There was nothing more to say at this point. I'd simply enjoy another aspect of the game while ensuring Cruz understood his time as kingpin was finished.

As I stepped out of the SUV, I gathered a stench of fried onions and garlic, the strong wafting scent another reminder how much I often loathed the city. I didn't bother waiting to see if Edwardo was trailing behind me, heading toward the

elevators. Whether or not Cruz was expecting me didn't faze me in the least. My family had been told about my release and I had a feeling Cruz had watched the breaking news bulletins highlighting the vapid news reporters.

As expected, two of my brother's soldiers stood guard by his penthouse door, the bruisers specifically hired for their brawn and strength. I gazed from one to the other before moving between them.

"I'm sorry, Alessandro, but Cruz doesn't want to be bothered," one of them dared to say to me. The asshole believed we were on a first-name basis? What the fuck had my brother turned our organization into, a brotherhood? Fuck that.

I didn't hesitate to retrieve my weapon, pointing the barrel against his fat cheek. "And I give a shit why? The last time I checked, you were working for me. What's your name?"

The asshole's eyes opened wide. Fortunately, he had the good sense to show me fear in his eyes.

"Bruno," he barked.

Fitting name.

"Well, Bruno. Maybe you need to be retrained. My name is Mr. Montenegro. I earned the respect given I'm your employer. I suggest you remember that we aren't friends, we aren't colleagues. You take orders and that's your entire life's goal. Understood?"

"Yes, sir," he said through gritted teeth and moved away from the door.

Huffing, I shoved the weapon back in my pocket, glaring at the other soldier before placing my fingers around the door handle. The damn thing was unlocked. My brother always did like to play with fire.

When I walked inside, I shook my head. He was also the messiest son of a bitch I'd ever known. There was shit everywhere in the front room, including clothes. I walked toward one of the leather couches, huffing as I picked up a red lace bra. No wonder he didn't want to be disturbed.

“Wait here,” I told the others, moving down the hallway toward his bedroom. As soon as I opened the door, I exhaled, the sound loud enough it drew the girl’s attention. She’d been riding him like a bucking bronco. Christ. It was already after noon in the middle of the week. What the hell was he doing playing with his flavor of the month during business hours?

“Fuck,” Cruz hissed as he pushed her to the side, throwing back the covers. “I thought you weren’t getting out until tomorrow.”

“Yeah. I’m sure you did. We need to talk. Get rid of her.”

My brother gave me a nasty look, yanking his trousers from the floor. “Same old shit, bro.”

“Uh-huh. Nothing ever changes.” I walked away, disgusted with the situation. As I returned to the living room, I noticed Edwardo had already helped himself to some of my brother’s liquor. That sounded like a good idea to me. It had been far too long since I’d had a tall glass of scotch. As I selected a bottle, I smirked. At least Cruz had good taste in libations.

I poured a glass, enjoying the silence as I walked toward the window overlooking the city. Then I swirled the liquid, taking a deep whiff before tipping back the drink. There was something so enjoyable about savoring the first few drops of an aged scotch or the first taste of a woman’s pussy. I’d longed for both. Now I would have everything I craved.

While waiting, I shifted my thoughts to the last phone call with Sierra. The sound of her voice had kept my cock at full attention for almost an hour after ending the conversation. She had that kind of effect on me, which added fuel to my depraved needs. The moment I thrust my tongue inside her tight channel would be the perfect day.

Patience.

I needed to remind myself of that every few hours or the savage would be unleashed far too soon.

Cruz kept me waiting, as if I had nothing better to do. He wanted to make a point.

So did I.

I sensed his presence behind me, heading toward the bar. The reflection in the veiled sunlight also allowed me to capture his tension. He was on edge, which pleased me. We'd communicated three times in the past four years, which I believed was a method in his arsenal of purposeful denial that even while behind bars, I was still the man in charge.

Sighing, I took another sip of my drink, allowing him the opportunity to prepare whatever he needed to puff himself up. Only when I heard the front door opening and closing did I turn around. At least the girl wouldn't be privileged to overhear what would be a short conversation. I studied him for a full minute, realizing he'd aged significantly in the years since I'd seen him. Our business had a tendency to do that to a man, sucking his life's blood away, the constant threats and need for violence absorbing all the energy.

"What do you want, Alessandro?" Cruz asked. There was no waver in his voice, but he'd been taught that in the face of an enemy, there could be no trace of fear.

At least I could admire his tenacity.

"What do I want?" I repeated, sliding a quick look toward Edwardo. He appeared passive, nursing his drink and keeping his gaze on the window instead of our interaction.

"You're here. That means you want something," Cruz huffed, finally turning to face me.

"What I want is what belongs to me. I'm going to make this as painless as possible. As of now, you no longer hold command of the organization."

He laughed, lifting his glass as if in celebration.

I knew better.

He was mocking me.

I took another sip of my drink, placing it on the bar. His hospitality was already waning.

"You think it's that easy to walk back in, Alessandro? Do you have a clear understanding of the shit you left behind, the mess I had to clean up?"

I took deliberate steps toward him, never blinking. When I was within a few inches, I waited until he retreated a few inches, but it was a telling statement.

The man continued to be afraid of me.

“I don’t need to think about what’s easy, Cruz. All I need to do is handle business, which it appears is something that has taken a backseat in your life. As of now, you’re no longer at the helm. In fact, consider yourself nothing but an employee and as such, you’re expendable. Send me updates by the end of the day. Period.”

“You don’t rule me, and you never will.”

My patience had reached the end with my brother. I’d been told flesh and blood meant more than money or power, but I’d called my father’s bluff then and I would again now. I didn’t hesitate, wrapping my hand around Cruz’s neck, slamming him against the wall.

“Alessandro,” Edwardo cautioned, coming close enough I could reach out and punch him. “You need to stop the bullshit. You’re on the same side.” His exasperated voice amused me.

“Are we?” I asked, throwing a hateful glance his way before directing my full attention to my brother, digging my fingers into his skin. “From where I see it, Cruz believed he was the master in charge. That will never happen.” Cruz was shorter by only an inch, but I used it to my advantage, crowding closer as I squeezed, enjoying the flush rushing across his cheeks.

“Fuck you, brother,” Cruz hissed, coughing.

Perhaps I was pushing things, exacerbating the situation, but I yanked my weapon into my hand, holding it out to the side. The smirk on my brother’s face only kicked the irritation into full blown rage. “If you challenge me, I’ll finish this.”

“Alessandro,” Edwardo pushed.

I took a deep breath, releasing Cruz’s neck, gritting my teeth from the hatred I felt. I knew enough about how he’d handled business from Matteo to realize I’d need to watch my back.

That meant Cruz would need to watch his front. When I came at a man, allowing him to experience the necessity of revenge, I always made certain he saw me coming. It was the only fair thing to do.

I allowed a smile to curl on my lips before heading to the bar, finishing off my drink. After placing the glass on the surface with a hard thud, I headed for the door, my weapon still in my hand.

“Be careful, brother. Every man has a weakness. Once found they can be turned into a viable source for revenge. It will be enjoyable to watch as you writhe in agony.”

Cruz’s words amused me, which widened my smile. “I look forward to the challenge, but keep in mind that winner takes all.”

His silence was rewarding, although I was certain he was already determining methods used to take me down. He should know better by now. I always won.

“Where to, boss?” Matteo asked.

“We’re headed downtown. There’s one more stop before I can fully enjoy my homecoming.” I turned toward Edwardo, never blinking as I stared at him. “You can take a cab from here, Edwardo. And I’m only going to say this once. If you ever question my authority or decisions again, it won’t matter that you and my father are friends. To either one of us. I think I make myself clear.”

His complexion was suddenly sallow, his eyes reflecting the fear he should feel. “Fine, Alessandro. I’m going to give you one piece of advice. In order to be a great leader, you need to gain respect, not demand it using fear tactics. That’s the difference between you and your father.”

I smirked as he walked away, finally shaking my head.

The man had no idea what I was capable of.

As I headed to the elevator, I was cognizant the only way to keep the wolves at bay was to hunt down the man responsible for nearly destroying my life. Dead or alive, all men left a footprint, and I was determined to find it.

And the lovely Sierra Wynters held the key to my future.

Soon, I would take her as mine, allowing her to understand that the need for revenge held no timeline. There were no rules required, only attention to detail in the planning. She would learn bad choices also had consequences.

I would capture her.

Use her.

Taste her.

Fuck her.

Punish her.

Then she would become my greatest weapon.

Revenge was the sweetest temptation of all.

CHAPTER 4



*S*ierra

Two months later

“Time cannot be captured, it can be lived, it can be felt, but it can’t be stopped, it can be expressed, it can be memorized, but it can’t be held for long, because it is like a butterfly, which wants to fly... and move on with life, to make beautiful memories, to live for a whole life.”

—Sadhana Jain

“Miss Wynters? This is Officer Robinson. I’m sorry to have to call you so late, but you were the only number in Mr. Bradford’s phone.”

“What? What happened? Did something happen?”

“Yes, ma’am. There’s been an accident. I’m sorry to inform you that Mr. Bradford didn’t survive.”

Sorry.

I’d heard so many sorrys over the first few weeks that I’d almost smothered. The call had come four years ago to this day, a date that I’d ignored for three years. I didn’t have the

opportunity to crawl under the covers and hide this time. As my mind continued to hear the officer's voice, the words echoing, I realized that as many times as I'd replayed them, I hadn't caught another disturbing aspect. Only number in his phone? That didn't make any sense. I'd known he used a separate cellphone for business, spending money to block the number in case one of his disgruntled clients decided to make threats. However, why wouldn't he have his friends or family in his personal device?

Too many questions burned in the back of my mind, including why his behavior had become so erratic during the last two months of... his life. My stomach churned at the thought.

"Earth to boss lady." Brittany's voice jerked me out of my haze.

"Huh?"

"I said, look around. This is so exciting, boss," she squealed from a few feet away, staring out at the huge crowd of people, the bistro filled to the max.

Blinking several times, a cold chill drifted down my spine as I tried to let the revelation go, finally absorbing what she was talking about.

I was shocked at the response to the hundreds of invitations I'd sent out, although the author I'd convinced to hold a book signing in my little store had recently hit the *New York Times* Bestseller List as well as *USA Today*. I had no idea how I'd finagled the event, except I'd been tenacious on the phone with the woman's agent, highlighting all the incredible reasons her client should consider my fashionable bistro for an event.

"Did the distributor deliver the last order of wines?" I asked, trying to keep my composure. I'd been forced to call in favors, using both Clarice and Dierdre as temporary help, every employee I had on duty as well. And still, I had no idea how I would satisfy the customer needs.

"Yes, right on time. Stop worrying so much. Seriously. This is the highlight of the year. Raleigh will never be the same."

For me, maybe the highlight of the decade.

As I moved into my office to double check I'd completed my tasks, I noticed a dozen roses sitting in a vase on my desk. Stiffening, it took me a few seconds to inch closer, staring at them as if I expected firecrackers or maybe a bomb to explode. Then I laughed to myself as I checked for a card. My mother had hinted she was sending something special as congratulations for such a monumental event, as she'd called it. Now she believed in me. Go figure. After breathing in their incredible scent, I slid my fingers past the stems. There was no card. Hmm...

"Ouch," I said as I removed my hand, grimacing at the drops of blood on my finger. The roses had thorns. What florist allowed the thorns to remain? I grabbed a napkin, wrapping my finger as I shook my head. At least they were gorgeous.

They were also the most fragrant roses I'd ever encountered, their scent spilling into the room, the fragrance enchanting. They managed to brighten my mood. Today was a day for celebration after all my hard work. Leaning over, I took a deep whiff, the petals tickling my nose. I ran my finger across the surface, tingling from the velvety feel.

Then I glanced at my long to-do list, satisfied everything was in order. I caught Brittany's arm as I returned to the main room.

"Were you here when the flowers arrived?"

"Oh, yeah. I forgot to tell you about them," she answered. "What did you do to your finger?"

"Watch out. They have thorns. Was there a card?"

Now she looked downright sheepish. "I might have accidentally, not on purpose thrown it away. It wasn't in a holder and fell on the floor. Ugh. I'm sorry. Do you want me to dig through the trash?"

Laughing, I shook my head. "Not necessary. It would have been a flowery statement from my mother. I've memorized all her comments." I threw the flowers another glance, my body stiffening as I shifted my gaze from thorn to thorn. How odd.

I spent the next ten minutes ensuring the famous author had everything she needed, including a glass of her favorite wine. Then I milled through the crowd, thanking as many people as I could. At least I had an uncanny ability to remember names after hearing them only one time. From what I could tell, sales were booming, cases of wine being sold when that rarely happened. Even books that had been on the shelf for over a year were being sold.

Finally, I was able to smile. This was going to be an epic weekend. The weather was fantastic, warm for a Saturday in mid-October, which allowed me to keep the patio open as well. I moved behind the counter, determined to indulge in a glass of wine myself. In three hours, this would all be over. Then I'd count the profits.

"You outdid yourself," Clarice said as she leaned over the cheese counter, giving me a mischievous look.

"Uh-huh. I know you. What's up your sleeve?"

"Pour me a glass of wine and I might tell you."

"You're a bad girl, Clarice. Sinful."

"I know," she mused. "My soul will burn in hell."

Dierdre appeared as if on cue, wearing the same expression I'd seen on Clarice. "You know. This is a perfect place to find the right man."

The right man. The dark stranger from the restaurant had made an appearance twice in the bistro. The second time, I'd accosted him, telling him in no uncertain terms that he wasn't welcome. He'd acted as if I was out of my mind, calling me several ugly names before storming out. I had been looney tunes for talking to the asshole on the phone for weeks, allowing myself to get worked up. Enticed. No more bullshit. That had become my motto as of late. At least the man had stayed away, which had provided a sense of comfort. Whatever his intentions had been, he'd never attempted to track down my new number. Thank God for small favors.

"Nope. Not gonna happen," I insisted, pouring two more glasses of wine and pushing them toward the girls.

“You need to get laid,” Clarice said as she plopped her hand on her hip.

“Why not a little louder so the entire bistro can hear you?”

“I’m serious, Sierra. You haven’t touched a man in four years.”

“What about all the dates I went on?”

She rolled her eyes. “Please. Correct me if I’m wrong but they were all first dates and if you allowed even one of them to touch, my guess is the poor guy had a black eye to show for it the next day.”

I grabbed a towel, tossing it in her direction. “Very funny.”

“I agree with her. You might as well become a nun for all the activity you’ve seen,” Dierdre added.

“Great. Now you’re ganging up on me. I’ll have you know I have plenty of sex. I have friends.” I was over the top with my defiant attitude. Even before Tristen’s death, our sex life had suffered along with everything else.

“You mean they’re all battery operated. Let me guess, you have a glass of white wine, put on a little Spanish guitar music, and read several very naughty paragraphs in a romance novel just before you pretend you have a lover.” Clarice wagged her finger.

I flexed mine into claws, threatening to scratch her. “You’re terrible. Both of you. And it’s red wine, not white.”

“You need to crawl on top of a man and ride his cock for it to qualify as sex.” Clarice took a step back before I could swat her.

“I hate both of you,” I snarled.

“Just looking out for your best interests,” Dierdre insisted.

“I’m fine. Just dandy in fact. But I am not using this event as a way to try and get a man. Period.” I stomped my foot like a petulant teenager to make my point.

“Then we’ll need to blackmail you,” Clarice stated in such a way, I knew she was serious.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” Now wasn’t the time to play games.

“Just setting you straight, including your priorities. So, here’s the deal. If you don’t want me announcing to all these lovely people that you hate romance books, then you’re going to allow us to select one fine-looking gentleman for you.”

“I don’t think people will care I don’t read romance books. No deal,” I told her, shaking my head. “You’ll need to try harder.”

“I guess you haven’t seen the latest article in *Raleigh City Life* then. I happen to have a copy with me.” Clarice was an evil woman to think this would work. However, when she held up the dog-eared page inside the magazine, I groaned.

The headline was fabulous, but not if she countered it, especially at an event for the hottest romance author in the country. *Corks and Books, Romance at its Finest.*

“You wouldn’t dare,” I snarled, using the gruffest voice I could manage.

“She would and I’d join her,” Dierdre said, her laugh full of wicked joy.

“You two are no longer my friends.”

“Come on, you love us,” Clarice cooed. “It’s only a conversation, a glass of wine maybe if Mr. Hottie shows up. Nothing more. At this point, neither one of us have noticed anyone good enough for you, but the afternoon is still early.”

“Go,” I huffed. “Do the jobs I hired for you. Remember? Today you work for me so I can fire the two of you.”

“Right. I see that happening.” Clarice took a sip of her wine then winked, the little brat.

I shooed Dierdre away, shifting into managerial mode. I took a moment to enjoy the fruits of my labor then shoved my wine onto a table in the back. I still had tons of work to do.

* * *

Three hours later and the crowd was starting to thin. Hundreds of people had come through my door. Thousands of dollars of merchandise had been sold. It had been a perfect day.

“We found him, darling,” Clarice said from behind me.

“Uh-huh. Let me guess, some book nerd or worse, a man twice my age.”

“Actually, he’s... perfect. And I mean freaking perfect. The bad boy billionaire type. Sexy voice, dark eyes. Highly intelligent. Mmm...”

Clarice’s idea of perfect was a man who made seven figures, buff and beautiful with a chiseled physique. That person didn’t exist except in a fantasy world. “Then he’s taken. Besides, he’s your type, not mine.”

“I don’t think so on either count. There’s no ring on his finger and he’s sitting alone on the patio. It’s the perfect opportunity. He ordered a glass of merlot without caring about the price. He was personable and has a great smile. He’s also reading a book he purchased. Why don’t you take him that glass and check him out?”

“You’re incorrigible.” I took a deep breath. It wouldn’t hurt to bring him his order.

“Would you prefer I give the sendoff to our author?” she asked, blinking rapidly. When I said nothing, she acted as if she was headed toward the back room.

“Don’t you dare, you little wench.”

“Feisty. I love it.” After a few seconds, she narrowed her eyes. “Look, in all seriousness, you deserve to find someone. Tristen died four years ago, honey. Four years.”

“I know that. Four years ago today.”

Frowning, she looked away briefly. “I didn’t realize that. You should have said something.”

“For what reason? As you said, it was four years ago.” I wasn’t certain why after so much time had passed, his death continued to bother me. Maybe because there’d been no opportunity for closure. Or maybe because I felt guilty. I’d

planned to have a discussion with him and suggest a break for a couple of months. I'd never been given the opportunity before getting the call from an Atlanta police officer.

"I'm not trying to be insensitive. You know that but I do care about you, which is why I'm bothered. I only met the man once in the year you were dating. But I know you cared about him. He'd want you to find happiness again."

One year of my life. Our romance had been like a whirlwind. He'd come into the shop and we'd started talking. Then he'd asked me out on a date. He'd lived in Atlanta, but we'd found time for each other, even if only a couple of weekends a month. His death had been tragic, pushing me into a bleak darkness, leaving me with far too many questions. "I know and I want to, but I'm not certain this is the right time." I looked away, hating the apprehension and anxiety. I'd felt that way since Tristen's death, even without the mysterious phone calls adding to the anxiousness.

"Is there something you're not telling me?" she asked, her eyes imploring.

"No, it's just..." I hated lying to her.

"I can't imagine the grief you feel, but you have to move on."

What was strange was that I'd mostly allowed the grief to dissipate. I hadn't been a real part of Tristen's world. We'd created one that never made sense, almost as if pretending we could live in a bubble. But he'd become so engrossed in his business that even our phone calls had lessened until we were speaking to each other maybe once a week if that.

After he'd died, the funeral had been another eye-opening moment. He'd barely talked about his family. The subject had just never come up. Seeing his mother and father had been disturbing, especially since they'd had no idea who I was or what I'd meant to Tristen. That wasn't normal.

"Is this mystery man of yours really that good looking?" I teased, trying to plaster a smile on my face.

Clarice used her hand as a fan, her lips forming a perfect O. "Girl. If I wasn't offering him to you, he'd be on my silver

platter, Sadly, I think he's the take what he wants kind of man, and you know how I feel about those."

"Uh-huh. Little Miss Domme in the making."

"So what? We can't all be hungry to submit to a powerful man."

"Very funny."

"I speak the truth. Take the man his wine. That's all I ask."

I took a deep breath, allowing my eyes to sweep across the expansive room. The reason I'd been able to expand was because of Tristen's untimely death and the generous sum of money he'd left me. Four hundred thousand had gone a long way into grabbing the empty store next door, refurbishing the interior of both, finally able to purchase specialty wines. There were times I'd felt guilty, but this was where we'd met on a cold October day five years before. I'd seen other couples meet here as well, returning again and again to rekindle their romance. Why not me?

"Okay, but don't expect miracles."

"Fantastic. I'll pour the wine. Go freshen up," she directed, giving me a loving shove.

"What's wrong with the way I look?"

"You look harried." She never failed to tell me the truth.

I resisted giving her the finger, instead heading to my private bathroom inside my small office. My home away from home. At least being in the bistro had given me a sense of purpose.

As I headed into the bathroom, flicking on the light, I realized how little time I'd actually been able to spend with Tristen. He'd always been busy traveling for work, as his client base had covered parts of North America as well as at least three countries abroad. We'd argued over where we'd live once we were married, my refusal to shut my shop down fueling our weekly fights, even though he'd offered to help me get one set up in Atlanta. The expense would have been three times as much. It was obvious I had been ready to move on.

Maybe I didn't need to feel guilty any longer.

I yanked the pin from my hair, allowing my long locks to drift across my shoulders then studied myself in the mirror. Even though I appeared as tired as I felt, the vivid cerulean hue of my blouse accentuated the color of my eyes. I was presentable, nothing more, but it would have to do.

Clarice had filled the wineglass, which made heading to the table an exercise in balance. When I approached the rear door, I hesitated, peering out and scanning the patio. There were four tables full of customers, then one other with a single gentleman sitting in a relaxed position, still wearing dark sunglasses even though the sun was waning. I took a deep breath and moved outside, heading in his direction with deliberate steps.

The first thing I noticed about the mystery man was his dark charcoal suit and white shirt, the intense turquoise tie a direct contrast to the dark color of his jacket. While most of my customers were dressed in jeans in order to be comfortable for the Saturday event, the sexy stranger appeared totally in his element, unfettered by the fact that he was overdressed. As I walked closer, I allowed my gaze to fall to his long fingers, his left hand holding the book he'd selected.

Bentley Little was a favorite author of mine, his sadistic view of society lending itself to the perfect horror story, a mixture of the surreal with tantalizing aspects of terror. The newcomer was so engrossed in the book that until I'd placed the glass in front of him, accidentally tipping the rim until several drops slipped ever so slowly to his trousers, he hadn't lifted his head.

Jesus. Why was I so nervous?

"I'm so sorry," I gasped, mortified at what I'd done. I immediately grabbed the napkin from the table, not thinking as I placed it on his thigh. My fingers were suddenly dangerously close to the thick bulge between his legs.

His reaction was minimalistic, lifting his head, his lips pursing. The fact he remained quiet was unnerving.

"Again, I'm sorry. I just wanted to bring you the wine you ordered. I can certainly have your trousers dry cleaned if you'd

like, or you can stop by with the bill, and I'll be happy to repay it."

Very slowly he removed his sunglasses, putting the book to the side. "That won't be necessary."

His accent was subtle, but decidedly Spanish, sultry in a way I hadn't expected. "Well, you're very kind, but I would hate for the experience to be one you remembered for all the wrong reasons."

"I assure you that this has been the most relaxed I've felt in a long time."

I was nervous for no other reason than I'd just made a fool of myself. "Bentley Little. 'Anyone in Horror's path is irrevocably altered.'" When his eyes opened wide, I laughed. "My favorite quote of his."

He nodded, swirling his glass of wine. "'Murder is an inherently evil act, no matter what the circumstances, no matter how convincing the rationalizations.'"

Half laughing, I found myself surprised that he was as much an aficionado as I was. "Also Bentley Little. And here I thought I was the only macabre person inside this bistro." The writer penned pieces that would terrify the majority of people. I found the writer's stories comforting.

"You'd be surprised the number of people who harbor filthy desires while pretending to be abhorred by the possibilities."

"An interesting philosophy, Mr...."

"Please, call me Alessandro."

"Alessandro," I repeated, the name certainly appropriate for what he was reading, sultry with a hint of delicious sins to come.

"Then you would be Sierra Wynters. I'm here because of the high praise provided by one of your local magazines."

"I take that to mean you're not from Raleigh."

He chuckled "No, just passing through attending to business. However, I couldn't resist the opportunity to indulge in my

favorite merlot.”

“You have exquisite taste.”

“Yes, I do.” Alessandro allowed his gaze to fall slowly.

“Again, I apologize.” He was disconcerting, enough so I wasn’t certain I could maintain my end of the deal.

“Truly unnecessary. However, you could make it up to me.” His look was piercing, but his smile drew me in.

“Hmmm... And how could I do that?” His eyes were mesmerizing, dark like the blackest night yet his irises held a shimmer of luminescence that drew me in, engaging in their darkness.

“By sharing a glass of wine with me.” When I didn’t respond right away, he leaned forward in his seat, the light breeze allowing the scent of his musky aftershave to drift into my system. The fragrance was seductive and inviting, just like the man sitting in front of me. “Or am I being too presumptuous?”

He had a presence that intrigued me. Powerful. Dominating. But not unkind. That was the key. There wasn’t a woman alive who didn’t appreciate a bad boy, but they required a heart of gold. Maybe I was into romance after all. His accent was as seductive as the man, and a part of me wanted to share more than just a glass of wine with him. However, something about him was off. Even if he wasn’t the dark stranger, I couldn’t rule out that he might be here under false pretenses.

Now you’re going too far. But was I?

“I think I can do that. Just allow me to make certain my guest enjoyed her event.” I couldn’t believe I’d agreed. I wasn’t a risk taker, not by any stretch of the imagination. However, this was my establishment. There were still at least two hundred people inside the store. Nothing was going to happen other than engaging in conversation over a glass of wine.

“Ah. I should have known by your attention to detail. You’re the owner.” He waited until I’d started to walk away before making the statement.

“I am.” I turned slightly, savoring the way his rounded lips evoked thoughts of passion, kissing on a long winter’s night.

As a smile slowly slid across his face, I was caught in the moment, studying his chiseled jaw and the way his long, dark eyelashes floated across his skin. The man was drop dead gorgeous, curly thick hair resting on his collar, broad shoulders that screamed of strength. Whew. Whether or not he was arrogant remained to be seen. At least it was possible that the conversation would be a break from the dull reality of my life.

And I could shut Clarice and Dierdre up for at least a week, a huge plus.

“I look forward to the time we spend together.”

His words lingered as I walked away, a series of sensations dancing down my legs. As soon as I reached the door, I looked back.

He was watching me.

CHAPTER 5



*A*lessandro

Blood.

My father had once told me that the hunger to spill blood was in our genes, the need as vital as the air necessary to sustain life. I'd never fully understood his statement until several years ago. My belief had always been that he'd been indoctrinated into the lifestyle, learning the art of torture at an early age. That had turned him into the merciless bastard I'd known him to be.

He'd insured that his two sons would be as brutal and harsh, relentless in our actions, never apologizing for a damn thing. Perhaps Cruz and I had been the ones indoctrinated. Bloodlust had been a part of our world early on, reigning over every other desire. I'd left a trail of dead bodies, the deaths necessary to secure our kingdom.

So had Cruz, only his path had taken him in an entirely different direction. In the month since my original discussion with him, he'd acted as if he'd acquiesced to my demands. Bullshit. He was biding his time. For what I'd yet to ascertain. That would come later. This was far more important.

What I'd learned over a relatively short period of time was that I was more like my father than I'd allowed myself to believe, engaging in similar methods of interrogation with our enemies. My penchant for violence had earned me a reputation as a savage, unforgiving bastard.

Which was all true.

Excuses had never been allowed in our household and they certainly would never be accepted in business. The requirement for revenge without exception was another necessity, which was the reason I was sitting in a lively bistro in the middle of a city that held no charm.

Except for the stunning blonde who'd ventured upon my table. I remained surprised that having the opportunity to speak with her personally had come so easily. I'd accept the good fortune as a gift, making the reprehensible side of what I was about to do even sweeter.

What I hadn't expected was my body's reaction upon seeing her in person. I'd been provided with a thick dossier on every aspect of her life, including several photographs. Edwardo had complied, barely saying two words given his newfound understanding of how I planned on handling business since my release. While he'd performed a deeper dive than his original investigation, there were no red flags concerning her past, just interesting details of an honest, innocent girl who'd turned into a magnificent woman.

She was also highly intelligent, which made me question on several occasions whether or not she had any idea what her fiancé had been doing during his long absences. Maybe not. The second question was always the same. Why had Tristen risked her life? Granted, he'd been damn good at keeping her a secret, but he'd also been no fool. He'd known exactly what getting involved in the Montenegro organization meant. Perhaps the various unknowns made the game even more exciting.

While I'd considered Sierra attractive when Edwardo had handed over the single photograph over six months before, in person she was absolutely stunning. Her eyes alone had created an instant insatiable hunger burning deep within, more so than what I'd felt while talking to her. I drummed my fingers on the table as I watched her walk away, her exotic floral fragrance lingering in my nostrils.

Did she know I was the hunter, a man who'd awakened her soul all those months ago? Did she have any idea a predator was in her midst, his hunger increasing by every minute? I took a sip of wine. I'd been surprised to find such a rich selection in the quaint bookstore.

I knew more about Sierra than she likely wanted others to know, including her kinky desires, which she'd hidden even from her closest friends. The internet footprint never lied, the websites she frequented giving a frank and sinful look into her preferences. The combination of spunky business owner in what I'd called a sleepy town atmosphere versus the filthy proclivities that rarely saw the light of day kept my cock throbbing. At this moment, my balls were tight, the ache making my breathing labored.

No woman had ever done that to me before. They were objects to be used, entirely pleasure driven. While my intentions were less than admirable, I sensed a stronger connection than I'd intended.

And I had no idea why.

Bentley Little. I'd found out enough about her favorite author to seem genuine in my approach, and her taste in literature was as unexpected as my need to taste her had been. My sweet Sierra had a dark side she'd likely never explored. Images of all the vile things I would do to her remained in the forefront of my mind. Soon, she would be writhing underneath me, her moans of pleasure providing the only music I'd ever need.

I pushed the book aside, curious as to what other secrets she was hiding beneath her conservative clothing and engaging smile.

I'd been offered the opportunity to handle the necessary revenge instead of my father. His phone call had been terse. He'd acquiesced at my request, finally convincing me that the man who'd nearly destroyed our empire remained alive and the woman who'd graced me with her presence only moments before knew of his whereabouts. I was required to do whatever was necessary in order to fulfill my duty, discovering what she

knew. If he had his way, she'd be tortured to gain the information. But she was far too beautiful to harm.

His words had been frank, the order issued one that couldn't be ignored. However, I would handle business my way. My father and I had always had a tumultuous relationship, enough so after his retirement, we rarely talked. His insistence I kill her was a stark reminder why we weren't close.

I'd devised a plan of my own, using the time I'd spent locked away like an animal wisely, preparing her for my visit.

The subterfuge had been enjoyable, at least for a little while. Then I'd realized I was required to be the one with patience, waiting until the appropriate time to take what already belonged to me. Tonight was the night, my tolerance running its course. Tasting her would be divine. Introducing her to the game already in motion the *piece de la resistance*.

Soon, the lovely Sierra would belong to me, a beautiful pawn in a dangerous game that I had every intention of winning.

The vibration from my phone forced a long sigh from my lungs. I'd forbidden interruptions under any circumstances. However, seeing Matteo's number meant he'd located the one man I'd yet to have a chance to... interrogate. I'd rounded up the other three men who'd worked alongside Tristen, explaining the error of their ways. Tonight, I would use the knife. The final man would provide answers. He was the only person who likely had some knowledge of Tristen's demise, whether real or fake, and what the bastard had done with the information regarding my business.

"I assume you're calling with good news," I said blankly.

"He was tough to find, but Butch and Sam located him in Reno. He'd retired, selling the firm he and Tristen had owned," Matteo said with amusement in his voice. "What do you want done with him?"

I rubbed my jaw as I debated. The timing wasn't the best but allowing the asshole to sweat his fate for a few days could prove helpful. "Put him on ice. I'll deal with him when I

return.” I didn’t need to explain any further. He knew exactly what I meant.

“You got it, boss. Do you want the daily maintenance routine?”

Matteo was enjoying this far too much. He’d developed the terminology, and it had always brought me a smile. The routine was inflicting various aspects of pain on a daily basis, which usually softened them up. Often, all I needed to do was show up and the traitor in question started singing. “The daily special.”

“Now you’re talking. I’m on it.”

“Call me if he talks. Otherwise, maintain silence.”

“Enjoy your hunt, boss.”

Chuckling, I ended the call. The prey was already in my sights.

As she returned, a glass of wine in her hand, I noticed her expression of apprehension. I wanted her on edge, uncertain of what to expect. I gathered a single whiff of fear as she approached, a scent that was as unforgettable as the metallic taste of blood.

Sierra said nothing at first, easing into the chair and studying me intently. If the woman believed she could cut through the layers of family honor and duty, she was wrong, but I’d enjoy watching her try. The psychological aspect of my foray into seduction was almost as enticing as the first taste would be.

“Alessandro. A sensual name.”

“Yes, my mother had a love of all things romantic.”

“Well, I suppose there is nothing wrong with being romantic.”

“Which means you harbor no intense feelings about passion,” I said, studying her carefully.

“Passion is something else entirely, as long as it’s real, not nestled between the pages of a book. However, I believe it’s difficult to find.”

“We will have to agree to disagree. Passion can be found in many things from enjoying the taste of a succulent meal to watching a perfect sunset over the ocean. Sometimes only a dark voice whispering thoughts of filthy sin is needed in order to desire satisfaction.”

Sierra seemed even more flustered, a light sheen of rose cresting along her jaw. I was pushing my luck, but that was my intent.

She took a sip of her wine, her eyes never leaving mine. Even with twilight settling in, the flickering table candle provided a stunning glow around her porcelain face. “Those kind of raw emotions aren’t easy to come by no matter how flattering the words or how sensual the person. I don’t believe in fairytales. What I do believe in is truthfulness, not hiding behind a veil of suspicious activity.”

It would appear *mi tesoro* was fishing. Soon, my little treasure would learn aspects that would become even more disturbing. Until then, I’ll allow her to try to pick apart the puzzle. It amused me more than it should.

“I agree, but often the things that become most desirable are those that create tingling vibrations that refused to be ignored.”

Her nod was subtle, but one of respect, which pleased me. Somehow, I had a feeling that wouldn’t last very long.

“I’ve talked with a man who in a few short sentences believed he’d found the key to unlocking my darkest desires. He spoke in similar riddles, believing I was enthralled enough to be unable to see through them.”

“Are you asking me if I’m purposely leading you down a path of self-discovery?”

Her laugh was unexpected, the soft lilt filtering into my eardrums reminding me of the beautiful strains of a harp, my mother’s favorite instrument. “Should I be?”

“We certainly don’t know each other well enough for that as of now, but the possibilities are endless.”

I'd made her uncomfortable, but her curiosity remained. Everything about her was a powerful pull, invoking the sadistic man inside. I shifted in my seat, my balls aching to the point of throbbing pain.

“What do you do, Alessandro, at least when you're not attempting to entice women into your lair?”

Her comment was perhaps the most unexpected of all. I burst into laughter, genuinely engaged in the conversation. “My family owns several businesses, including one in Raleigh.”

“What kind of businesses?”

I leaned over, enjoying the sound of her voice. “Is that what you really want to know, Sierra? Or is there something else on your mind?”

“I'm sorry, boss. I need to interrupt.”

As soon as the female employee interrupted our conversation, Sierra pulled out of the moment, lifting her head and I could swear there was recognition in her eyes.

I'd need to play this carefully, which wasn't my style, but the prize was well worth the wait.

Tonight would change everything.

My world.

My needs.

My desires.

And her destiny.

CHAPTER 6



*S*ierra

The few minutes Brittany had needed turned into over an hour of fighting with the cash register system, the internet outage causing me to handle every transaction the old-fashioned way. Thank God everyone had been patient while I'd wanted to pull my hair out. I'd never had a single issue, not one, and of course it would occur on the single biggest night of my illustrious and often infuriating career.

When the last customer had been checked out, I floated into the back, leaning against the wall, wiping beads of perspiration from my face with my arm. At least my besties had taken pity on me, cleaning up the huge mess Brittany and I had created. I'd pushed them out the door only twenty minutes before, but it hadn't been before Clarice had gone looking for the sexy man to explain my departure.

He'd left, likely in disgust.

Oh, well, it wasn't meant to be.

"You look pooped, boss," Brittany said from the doorway.

I blew hair out of my eyes and sighed. My instinct told me I'd gone from looking harried to horrible. Meanwhile, she looked fresh as a daisy. Youth. It was wasted on the young. "You're right. I am ready to collapse."

"You'll be happy with me. I totaled all the receipts so far. Everything adds up to the penny."

Bless her soul. “You are amazing. Thank you and I couldn’t have done tonight without you.”

She shrugged, unused to getting a compliment from me. That had to change. “At least minoring in accounting has paid off.”

Laughing, I pushed myself away from the wall. “We may need to alter your job description in the future. I think you’re ready for additional responsibilities.”

“Really?” I thought the girl was going to jump out of her skin.

“Absolutely. Now, get out of here. There’s very little left to do and it can wait until the morning.” I’d grab the cash, deposit it at the bank, and handle everything else tomorrow. Maybe it was good the mystery man had already left. I wasn’t in the mood for pretending I liked romance any longer.

“You’re da bomb!” she said before untying her apron.

Did kids really say that any longer? I glanced at the time. Ten minutes to closing. Maybe I’d lock the doors a teensy bit early. I deserved it. She wasted no time gathering her things, scampering out before I had a chance to change my mind.

I grabbed my keys, heading toward the patio to lock the back door. As I turned around, I remained in shock at how much inventory had left the building. Maybe I’d snag a bottle of champagne before going home. I hadn’t felt this happy in a long time. I ran my fingers over several tables as I headed for my office, keeping a smile on my face for longer than I usually did.

Then I heard a noise.

Someone remained inside the store.

There was no reason for me to be nervous. The shop was still technically open after all. Unfortunately, my limited conversation with the mystery man had been far too similar to the one I’d had with the dark stranger. I had to remind myself that the voices were different, one with a Spanish accent, the other without, but the sixth sense I’d relied on continued to nag me.

I moved toward the sound, stopping short of one of the bookshelves. "I'm sorry. It's almost closing time." After chastising my ridiculous behavior, I rounded the corner.

Alessandro stood with a book in his hand, absorbed in whatever he was reading. If he sensed my presence at first, I couldn't tell.

"Alessandro." There was no reason for me to whisper, but I did.

He lifted his head slowly, narrowing his dark eyes. He was even more impressive standing, allowing me to enjoy a quick glimpse of his long, muscular legs. He was taller than I'd expected, which added to his sex appeal.

"Sierra," he said gruffly.

He said nothing else, but he didn't need to. His eyes said it all. He wanted more. He longed to devour me, stripping away my defenses, ravaging every inch of my body.

Or was I just dreaming? I closed my eyes briefly and when I opened them again, I pressed my hand over my lips. What the hell was wrong with me? Now I was daydreaming about a stranger? I was an emotional wreck, the highs and lows too much for my system.

"Are you alright?" he asked as he walked closer.

I put my hand out involuntarily, as if my small gesture would stop him. "I'm fine. It's just... I didn't know anyone was still here."

Alessandro slowly checked his watch then took a deep breath. "I didn't notice the time. I'll consider returning tomorrow for the book. You must be exhausted after the success of your event."

Had he remained here the entire time?

You hoped he would. You longed to see him, to touch him.

Fuck him...

My inner voice was off the rails. I swallowed hard, the reverberations from his deep voice swirling around me.

“I’m...” My tongue was tied, which wasn’t like me. I laughed nervously and took cautious steps forward, noticing he’d switched genres entirely. “I’m pleurably thoughtful about the results.”

My odd statement brought a look of amusement to his face. “Thoughtful is often good when words and comprehension of emotions fail you.”

“True.” I glanced at the book he was holding and sucked in my breath. *The Art and Power of Submission*. I had few erotic books in the store, none of them fictional and all out of view of anyone under six feet tall, but he’d selected what I considered to be an extremely passionate take on the art of sadomasochism. Almost instantly heat swept up from the base of my neck, creating an awkward moment at the worst possible time. I forced myself to look away, a lump forming in my throat. “If you’d like to purchase the book, I’d be happy to ring it up for you.”

I shook off the scattered sensations, chocking them up to a long day and a dire need of a glass of wine.

“Then I believe I would.” He came closer, now standing only a few inches away. When I turned my head, I was forced to lift my chin in order to be able to look into his eyes.

He was several inches taller, at least a hundred pounds heavier. I felt small around him, even though I was five foot ten. I’d never felt so embarrassed in my life. It was my bookstore, and I’d purchased every single book on the shelves, yet I was red-faced over one I’d hand-picked. As he slowly lowered his gaze, sliding his hooded eyes down my neck to the cleft between my breasts, I sensed he was undressing me with his eyes. For a few seconds, I couldn’t speak, vivid, filthy images popping into my mind.

I could hear his voice commanding me to drop to my knees, lifting my arms as I awaited his choice of punishment. I could almost feel the rough pads of his fingers as he brushed them across my cheek. And as his intoxicating scent rushed to my very core, I didn’t need to imagine my arousal. My panties were already damp, my nipples aching.

All I could hear was the rapid beating of my heart as his rich, exotic scent floated into my core, expanding as a flame erupted.

Touch him.

Kiss him.

Tease him.

Now my inner voice had gone too far. I nervously brushed my hand through my hair, hating the ridiculousness of my fantasy.

“This particular book is very... dark. Some might consider it dangerous,” I half whispered, uncertain why I’d presented any reservations. I’d devoured the book in a single sitting, every page leaving me tingling with excitement, my body shimmering from perspiration. Nothing I’d found on various websites had moved me as much as the book he’d selected.

“A beautiful woman should never be embarrassed about indulging in passion, whether it’s between the pages of a book, the fevered touch of a lover, or from being able to provide a powerful release while visualizing a lover. The only thing wrong with any aspect of craving something dark or dangerous is denying what cannot be lived without.”

The words haunted me. They also left me breathless.

“If only finding passion was that easy,” I managed to rebut, trying to keep my composure.

He inhaled, his long eyelashes skimming across his cheeks. “What most find easy isn’t worth seeking. It’s only in the difficulties of capturing your prey that one can be satisfied with accepting the pleasures of the flesh.” The subtle yet powerful words were enthralling, more so than I cared to admit.

They also wrapped around a part of my brain that allowed a single red flag to be raised. Where the hell was this going?

I backed away, feeling a combination of excitement as well as craggy discomfort. “Few men understand a woman’s needs well enough to know how to provide either the pleasure or passion, Alessandro. I would hope a savvy man such as

yourself would understand that even in playing word games, most women are not easily veiled to the obvious approach.” I waited for a few seconds before taking the book from his hands, accidentally touching his.

The jolt of explosive electricity was a rush I’d never experienced. Almost immediately I was lightheaded, shocked that I’d had that kind of reaction to anyone.

He chuckled, unreactive to the shared moment. “You are a tenacious woman, Sierra. I admire that more than you know. And you’re completely right about your assessment of men. The majority have no clear understanding of a woman’s needs. However, I challenge you that in turn, most women don’t allow themselves the joy of uninhibited and often daring aspects of sex.”

“That’s because it takes trust.” The hint of fear and suffocation I’d faced was fading, the sparring we’d shared more enjoyable than any conversation I’d had with a man in a long time.

“True,” he said, his eyes lit up like firecrackers. “Don’t allow me to hold you up any longer.”

I nodded, turning stiffly and heading toward the cash register. When he didn’t follow immediately behind me, another trickle of bated anticipation floated into my system. What the hell was he doing? While I enjoyed the banter, I had the need to open a bottle of wine and curl up under a blanket watching some crazy horror flick.

Stop lying to yourself. You want what only he can provide.

He appeared almost out of nowhere a minute later, a bottle of the wine he’d been drinking in his hand. “I did very much enjoy your hospitality.”

“Excellent. Thank you for joining me tonight.” Why was I thanking him? Because it was the right thing to do? I wasn’t certain and it really didn’t matter. I’d never see him again. After ringing up the items, he tossed a hundred-dollar bill across the counter.

“Please, keep the change. I never provided a tip.”

This time I gave both him and the money a dour look, but I accepted the cash. After reaching for a bag, I realized Brittany hadn't restocked them. "Let me grab a bag."

He lifted an eyebrow then turned his attention to the rest of the shop while I walked inside. I took a deep breath, the conversation more overwhelming than I'd originally believed. I pulled a bag into my fingers, taking several deep breaths as I rubbed my aching eyes. I'd never known anyone to be as oppressive, yet demonstrative, as if he was challenging me to find words to castrate his beliefs. It was all too... familiar.

The lump in my throat was gone, replaced by a strange feeling of claws digging into my skin, slowly clamping around my neck like a tight vise. With one wrong move, the fingers could snap off my head. I pursed my lips, trying to laugh at myself for being so ridiculous. He was flirting with me, his provocative method earning him a gold star, even if I wouldn't take him up on what could be an extremely explosive couple of hours beneath the sheets.

I laughed softly to myself before twisting, barreling my way forward.

And straight into his arms.

The force we both used almost toppled me to the floor. The bag drifted out of my hand as I was forced to cling to his jacket. He cocked his head, his breathing as irregular as mine as he peered down at me.

I opened my mouth to apologize then couldn't form a syllable. Being in his arms was crazy, so much so that I tried to push him away. Then he reacted by shoving me against the wall, planting his hands on either side of me.

The moment of utter silence was even more suffocating, but as the sound of my heartbeat mixed with the harshness of his low-slung growl, I found myself fisting my hands around his shirt, dragging myself away from the wall and closer to him.

His musky scent filtered into every pore, staining my skin, infusing my blood. He lowered his head, his nostrils flaring just seconds before he crushed his mouth over mine. The kiss

became an explosion of passion, my heart hammering in my chest as he rolled my lips open and closed. I could barely breathe. I had no ability to think, and my vision was a hazy mess of desire and insanity meshing together. Everything was a huge blur, except for the attraction I felt for him.

As I playfully pushed my fists against his chest, one then the other, he slid his fingers to my throat, wrapping them around my neck then rolling his thumb across my jaw. The moment of intimacy refused to be denied, his tongue dominating mine. I was lost in the moment, breathless with wonder as dazzling sensations coursed through me. The way I quivered, the ability to let go around him was insane, but I'd never felt this free in my life, as if experiencing a kiss for the first time.

He squeezed his hand, using his thumb to massage my chin and cheek, keeping me mesmerized as he slid his other hand down my side, slowly curling the hem of my skirt in his fingers. He broke the kiss long enough to allow me to catch my breath as he whispered the kind of dirty words I'd longed to hear from a man.

"I'd love to lick every inch of you, tasting your skin until you begged me to feast on your sweet pussy. Then I'd force my cock down your throat, face fucking you until I filled your mouth with cream. Would you like that, Sierra?" He issued another growl as he nipped my lower lip before brushing his back and forth across mine. "Or would you prefer that I rip the clothes from your body, shackling your arms over your head, leaving you hanging in wait for my return?"

"Yes." The shock of my easy answer wasn't lost on the man I didn't know, a stranger with a deep voice and an even deeper sense of knowing. As he captured my mouth again, another series of explosions swept through my mind and body, my legs quivering as he crawled his hand along the inside of my thighs. The second he rubbed his fingers against my lace-covered mound, I stiffened, pawing his chest as I wiggled back and forth.

Within seconds, my anxiety disappeared, pleasure-releasing pheromones replacing it. The scent of our desires wafted together, creating wave after wave of tremors. He rubbed

several fingers up and down my mound, pushing the material between my swollen folds. His fingers continued to dig into the skin of my neck, but I wasn't afraid. He wasn't trying to hurt me, just allowing me to experience a small representation of the sexual freedom I'd read about within the pages of the book.

What I was doing was crazy, my hips bucking against him, longing for his touch, but I couldn't seem to stop myself. He slipped a single finger under the thin elastic of my thong, swirling the tip around my clit until it ached. I wanted him to drop to his knees, sucking and licking until I came in his mouth.

As he slipped his finger just inside my tight channel, I managed to ease my hand to his groin, stroking his rock-hard cock. Oh, God. His shaft was thick and throbbing, adding to the crazy yet filthy moment and the dirty thoughts rolling through my mind.

Nothing could have prepared me for the way my body reacted, surrendering in a way I hadn't done before. I was crazed with need, uncertain of what I was doing, but unable to stop the freight train from picking up speed. He was relentless in his touch, plunging one then several fingers deep inside.

My muscles crushed over the invasion, but not in a way to prevent his actions, instead pulling his long digits in even further. He broke the kiss a second time, lifting my chin then dragging his tongue from the base of my ear all the way down the side of my neck.

Panting, I closed my eyes, continuing to rub his cock, my fingers tingling from the feel of him in my hand. Every guttural sound powered into my ears, every rushing beat of my heart mixing together in a dangerous yet tempting chorus of need versus want. Seconds later, I realized he'd grabbed both my arms, lifting them over my head then wrapping one of his hands around both my wrists.

I blinked furiously, the slight whimper that pushed past my lips giving him a smile. Every breath I took was my way of begging him to continue without words. I couldn't bring

myself to beg for something that should only be shared with someone I knew and trusted.

Not... him.

My mind finally activated, rising from the long period of hibernation, breaking through the ice crystals that had formed around my brain. There was no denying this was my dark stranger, the same man who'd taunted me for weeks, tempting me with the darker side of sin.

When he slowly dropped to his knees, I let out a strangled moan, flailing one hand against the wall as I peered down. His expression was dark, ripped with the same dangerous cravings I'd longed for. He shoved my skirt above my thighs, tugging my thong aside then opening my legs. The growl he issued filtered into my ears, another wave of electricity creating a white-hot sear along every inch of skin where he'd touched me.

I wasn't expecting such an infusion of sensations from the first swipe of his tongue. I laughed nervously, blinking several times in some crazy effort to focus. He kept his fingers wrapped around my thighs as he swirled his tongue around my clit. I'd never been so wet, heat sweeping up and down the length of my body. I finally closed my eyes, realizing I would slide to the floor if he wasn't holding me.

He took his time, flicking his tongue back and forth across my clit then sucking on the already tender tissue. I lolled my head to the side, taking shallow breaths as he licked all the way down my pussy. Time seemed to stand still, the guttural noises he was making floating around us.

I couldn't seem to stop shaking as his actions became more powerful, dragging his tongue up and down until I was oversensitized.

"Oh, my..." I breathed, no longer recognizing my voice.

Those two little words encouraged him and within seconds, he thrust his tongue into my tight channel, lapping my cream. The moment he rolled his thumb across my clit, I thought for certain I was going to erupt in an intense orgasm, but his

mouth and tongue were masterful implements. He pulled back, refusing to allow me satisfaction so soon.

Every sound he made pushed me into a dull sense of reality. I no longer cared that he was a stranger, his feast the intimate experience I'd yearned for. I thought about the unlocked door, the fact anyone could enter, watching the gorgeous man have his way with me. While a flush of embarrassment crested along my jaw, there was no way I could or would stop the filthy act.

I tangled my fingers in his hair, holding him in place as he shoved two fingers inside, flexing them open as my muscles clamped around them. I was lost in the bliss, bucking against his hold as he drove his tongue deeper inside. He brought me so close to an orgasm three times before pulling away, using the same fingers to smack my pussy lips. The combination of pain and pleasure was almost too much, pushing me toward a heightened plateau.

"Oh, God. Yes. Yes. Yes!"

He repeated the same move three times, driving me to the point of utter madness. Panting, I tossed my head back and forth, unable to stop several moans from escaping. How could any man know exactly what I needed so quickly? I licked my lips, staring down at him, studying his work as he continued his feast. Dear God, nothing had ever felt this good.

Alessandro pulled his head away with another throaty growl before making a single command. "You will come when I tell you. If you disobey me, you will be punished."

I half laughed, his deep baritone keeping me on edge. "Yes, sir." The words left my mouth so easily, as if I'd surrendered to him. This was crazy, but oh-so powerful.

As he resumed his task, I pressed my head against the wall, jutting my hips forward and opening my legs even wider. An orgasm was right there, my body spasming from the intensity of need. "Please. Oh, please."

He ignored me for what seemed like ten minutes, taking his time to enjoy his prize. After he rolled his lips against my

thigh, he blew across my heated pussy. “Come for me. Come.”

“I...”

“I said. Come!”

As he thrust his tongue and fingers deep inside, there was no possibility of holding back. The climax was so explosive, I couldn't hold back a scream.

“Yes!”

Obviously pleased with my response, he continued licking and sucking, drinking every drop of my cream as one orgasm rushed into a tidal wave. I gasped, no longer able to catch my breath, tugging at his hair with one hand as I smacked the wall with the other. Stars floated in front of my eyes, all in vibrant colors. I'd never had such an explosive orgasm in my life.

He continued to hold me, licking vigorously for another full minute, maybe longer. Only when I stopped shaking did he ease my panties into place, lowering my skirt before standing.

My eyes must have reflected the final acceptance of who he was because his glimmered from the darkest places inside his soul. “That was only a taste. Perhaps you'd enjoy another at a later time.” As he slid his slickened fingers into his mouth, I held my breath, mesmerized as he sucked the juices from each one, taking his time while doing it.

Then he backed away, his upper lip curling, disappearing from sight seconds later.

I took a ragged breath, sliding halfway down the wall, uncertain my legs would hold my weight for very long. By the time I walked into the main room, he was gone.

And instead of relief, I felt a strange sense of sadness.

CHAPTER 7



*S*ierra

I'd never been the kind of woman to stay in a fog, but that's how I felt, a thick, sticky haze that kept my movements slow and my mind remaining in a vacuum. There was no reason that the touch of Alessandro's fingers, the use of his tongue should have enthralled me to the level they had. None. He was a man and nothing special, at least that's what I continued to tell myself. Only it wasn't true.

Alessandro was like a lion, a proud savage who enjoyed hunting his prey like humans did when partaking in slaughtering a wild animal. Even in his expensive Armani suit and crisp white shirt, there was no mistaking the king of the jungle or ignoring his primal needs.

I'd seen the look of hunger in his eyes, an unabashed fervent need that bordered on obsession. For those few incredible moments being in his arms, I'd felt like his lioness, a possession he could fondle and fuck at will.

"God. What are you thinking?" I rubbed my forehead, still trying to process the strange, addictive attraction. There was no way in hell he could have known I'd read the book. Not one. I hadn't ordered it on my personal account. I'd taken it from the shipment received for the store with every thought of returning it after glancing at the contents.

Months later it had remained in my bookshelf. The stalker had acted as if he was able to read my mind during the sensual

phone calls. Alessandro had acted the same, as if he'd already learned what my body craved. I was going mad from trying to deal with the possibility that they were the same person.

But what if they were? Did I really care? Was I ashamed that both the calls and his presence had aroused me? Maybe. Was it guilt? I wasn't certain any longer.

Tristen wasn't the man I'd thought he was. On the outside everything had seemed perfect, as if karma had put us together, but everything had been slowly unraveling during the last months, making the time spent together less enjoyable and more about questioning the parts of his life he'd refused to allow me to see.

Maybe I'd been a fool then and certainly I was being one now. But wasn't it my right to enjoy living, just like Clarice had suggested?

I sat at the kitchen table, swirling the stem of the wineglass back and forth as I stared at the Grenache I'd opened. The red was usually comforting, but the color reminded me of the single photograph I'd found on the internet of Tristen's crash. Even the dull lighting of the early morning hadn't hidden the bloodstains splattered against the shattered windshield.

Sighing, I closed my eyes, trying to block out the images, but it had been the first ugly vision flashing through my mind every night for a month after receiving the news. They'd all but faded away until now, yet the photograph had been crystal clear.

His car had flipped several times, landing on the roof, his body partially tossed through the windshield. At least that's what I'd been told. I hadn't been the next of kin, only privy to what the officers had wanted to tell me. I hadn't pushed it because I didn't have the strength at the time, but the entire way the case had been handled had bothered me then.

Even more so now.

Maybe this was all about the guilt of allowing a stranger, a man who'd stalked me for months to touch me in an intimate way. An inappropriate way.

Even if I'd enjoyed every minute of it.

Groaning, I shoved the glass away, rising to my feet. I walked toward the kitchen window, staring out at the darkness. There was only a sliver of a moon tonight, the position creating eerie shadows in a garden I'd yet to spend much time in. Maybe next spring.

After a few minutes of being unable to get the nagging feeling I'd missed something out of my mind, I left the glass where it was, heading into the bedroom. Where the hell had I left the officer's card? I grabbed my purse, tossing it on the dresser then yanking out my wallet. It should be with my credit cards and driver's license. Only a few seconds later, I grew frustrated as hell, dumping the contents on the surface, sifting through the half inch thick pile twice. It wasn't there. What the hell had happened to it?

Think. The box. Maybe I'd tossed his card into the box of... Tristen's things. Packing what little he'd left had taken me almost three months to do, and I'd only managed to accomplish the task when Clarice had come over to hold my hand. I'd shoved it into the closet thinking the ugly task was a win then had tried to forget about it. He'd never kept anything of any value at my house, just a few items in case his suitcase was lost, or he'd forgotten to pack something. Still, the contents had become precious items, his scent lingering long after his death.

As I pulled down the plain cardboard box, I realized I didn't even remember what was packed inside. I dumped everything onto the bed, forced to take a step back before laughing at myself. A toothbrush, two tee shirts, a pair of underwear, his favorite earbuds, and a book he'd brought with him, even though I'd never seen him read a single page. I'd slipped the officer's card in the middle. I debated tossing the entire box. It was almost midnight. At this point, I couldn't think about what to do any longer.

I returned the items to the barely larger than shoebox-sized container I'd used, returning it to the shelf. Then I grabbed my phone, dialing the officer's number.

As expected, the call went straight to voicemail.

“Officer Robinson. This is Sierra Wynters. I’m certain you don’t remember me, but my fiancé died in a horrific crash four years ago today. I remember that because it’s a day I can barely tolerate. Anyway, I was calling to ask you about the events surrounding the crash. I...” *Think. Don’t ramble. What are you trying to say?* “I don’t think the crash was an accident. In fact, I think Tristen Bradford was murdered. Please call me. If you don’t, I will keep calling you until I get an audience.”

* * *

Alessandro

Dangerous.

Heartless.

Cruel.

I was a sick man capable of doing heinous things.

That detailed every aspect of the actions of my family. I’d never felt anything more than anger, sadness only once in my life, and a limited amount of happiness. On this night I felt elated, electrified in a way that had never happened before.

Because of a woman, someone I should eliminate instead of fucking with, but I couldn’t pull away, my needs increasing to a level that I could no longer control.

Breathtaking.

That was the single word adequately describing her.

The moments spent with her had been unusually enticing, more so that I’d imagined. She’d awakened the dark hunger that even after talking with her I’d managed to keep just beneath the surface, refusing to acknowledge that my desires were anything more than my hunger for revenge. Then with a single look, the taste of her sweet pussy filling my mouth, I’d

been forced to realize she was the only woman who could satisfy my sadistic needs.

What interested me even more was how much I enjoyed her company. While a part of her had already figured out who I was at the bistro, the fact she'd continued with our delicious game had further intrigued me.

She had nerve, defiance that refused to take into account the power I wielded. That took the kind of courage few men had ever shown, or at least had lived another day after ignoring my commands.

And the taste of her had been... *magnifico*. Magnificent.

As I'd waited for her arrival at home, I'd reconsidered my original plans, finding them even more tempting than before. Up to this point, I'd wanted her surrender, but not for the same reasons as I yearned to achieve now. Standing in her house in the darkness had provided a new perspective, a reminder that I hadn't experienced the taste of a woman in far too long.

The way she'd responded had been extraordinary, more than I could have asked for. However, the intense longing I felt couldn't interfere with business. I stood in the shadows, enjoying doing nothing but watching her. There was no doubt the charade was over in that she'd recognized my voice patterns if nothing else. That would either make her easier to handle or more difficult. I didn't care which.

I turned off the kitchen light, heading toward the bedroom where she'd retreated, remaining in the darkness as she contacted a police officer about the accident. What Edwardo had discovered had left most assuming Tristen Bradford had died in a horrific tragedy, but I was certain now that that wasn't the case.

Was it possible he'd been killed by one of my enemies in their attempt to learn the secrets he'd spouted off to the feds? Yes, but it was becoming highly unlikely. Both the Irish and the Russian pigs enjoyed boasting about their accomplishments, especially if their work had helped take down an opposing leader. None of that had occurred. Even though Cruz had

refused to seek revenge, neither party had attempted to overthrow our organization.

Tristen had been in a trusted position, privy to various secrets and methods of operation much like Edwardo had been. That made what he'd stolen priceless. Fuck. Just thinking about the son of a bitch increased my rage.

I'd vetted the man myself after Edwardo had provided his usual dossier on prospective employees. At least my father's friend had a way of digging into someone's past, learning more about the individual than any law enforcement agency could manage. However, I'd insisted on delving deeper, speaking to various associates who'd worked with him. Tristen had seemed like the perfect candidate, estranged from his family, spending more time honing his skills as a brutal dictator than enjoying the fruits of his labor.

Or so I'd assumed.

Sadly, Tristen had been the master of secret keeping, including his relationship with Sierra. Given he'd been required to continue his work with other more legitimate individuals and companies, I'd thought nothing of his constant trips. As long as he showed up on time when he was needed, he'd been allowed to live out his life the way he saw fit.

I'd allowed him to get far too close, and I'd considered him my personal conduit for over a year. He'd never steered me wrong and up until the day before I'd been arrested, I'd never suspected him of the kind of treachery he'd managed.

Until it had been too late.

Anger furrowed inside of me from just thinking about the damage he'd done to my organization. The tarnishing of my personal reputation continued to rile me to this day. Sierra would be required to soothe the monster clawing at the walls inside of me.

She turned out the light in the bedroom after her search of a box I'd ignored in my initial search of her house. She issued an exasperated sigh before moving toward the door.

That's the moment I stepped inside her bedroom, the scent of her filling my system, my cock twitching as the longing turned into necessity.

"Hello, Sierra. It's time we got to know each other even more intimately than before."

I sensed her instant fear, but there was the same sense of yearning that had kept her in my arms, arching her back as her nipples had tightened. Her taste lingered in my mouth, the sweetness of her pussy awakening every predatory desire. I took another step, controlling my patience as well as my needs. The game was moving into another phase and this one would be far more enjoyable.

There was a quiet innocence about her, a baby soul refusing to believe in the concept of monsters lurking in the crevices. The women I'd tolerated over the years were vain creatures, only out for themselves, and usually that included a hefty bank account. They couldn't care less what they had to do in order to show off bling to their girlfriends, parading around in a hundred-thousand-dollar car. This girl was different.

Was it possible she had no idea about Tristen? Was there a chance she was truly the real thing, a woman who couldn't care less about money or clout? I didn't know and at this point, it didn't matter. She'd yet to figure out that by catching my eye, she'd already sold her soul to a very bad man, the devil in disguise.

I didn't want to break her, but using her in every way, exacting my revenge on her luscious body, thereby satisfying the beast would be perfectly acceptable.

If I was a better man, one who had a conscience, perhaps I'd feel a small tremor of guilt for destroying her life. That just wasn't the case. She was expendable, but only after providing what I needed.

And what I desired.

Let the real hunt begin.

"Who are you?" Her voice was soft, but I sensed her increasing apprehension even though I also gathered a whiff of

her desire. I wasn't surprised her first instinct wasn't to scream in hopes that someone on her darkened block would come to her aid. She was intrigued more than terrified.

Chuckling, I walked closer, stopping just inside the slender stream of moonlight. "Don't you recognize me, my sweet kitten? Tell me. Have you thought of me at night, wondering when I'd come for you? Have you fantasized about what I'd do, craving what you know only I can provide?"

"What do you want?" She attempted to add defiance to her question, as if she could take limited control, pushing me away.

She'd soon learn that once a lion was let out of his cage, there was no turning back.

"What do I want? The answer is not what I want, but what I'm going to take. But you already know that. Don't you?"

As the moment began to unfold, a sweeping sense of darkness fell over me, refusing to be denied.

Sierra Wynters had awakened the devil.

CHAPTER 8



*S*ierra

I gasped, trying to get air into my lungs, the feeling of suffocation unlike anything I'd ever felt.

I was dead. I had to be.

As I opened my eyes, my vision was assaulted by the darkness. There was a complete absence of light. Shivering, I was afraid to move.

As I tried to piece together what had happened, I felt a presence somewhere near my location. After taking a few labored breaths, I stretched out one arm, trying to gather of sense of where I was. I was lying down. Carefully and without making any noise, I patted my hands against whatever I was lying on. It was hard, but the surface wasn't the floor. I managed to wrap my hand around a rounded edge of something. Metal. Maybe I was lying on a cot. But where? Where had the bastard taken me?

He'd broken into my house. And... Just the thought of what had happened between us increased my pulse.

When I took a deep breath, I was able to detect his scent. It was all over me. Spices and sandalwood.

And sex.

He'd fucked me.

The bastard.

Repulsed, I shifted only a couple of inches, but it was enough to remind me that he'd also spanked me like I was some bad girl and my bottom hurt like hell.

Alessandro. I couldn't stand to whisper his name, yet it rolled through my mind over and over again like some damn satellite broadcast. I also ached from the hard fucking, but I remained wet, my nipples still sore from his merciless taking of me. Shivering, I shifted again, my eyes finally getting used to the darkness. There were shadows in the room, although I couldn't make out what they were.

Cold.

An icy chill tore through my veins, my breath skipping as terror wrapped itself around my heart, dragging me into the depths of horror. I had to remain strong. I needed to find out what the hell he wanted with me. I was no fool. This was about something Tristen had been involved in. I should have listened to my nagging inner voice years ago, demanding that I learn every detail about the accident, but I'd been shell-shocked, allowing myself to be manipulated.

I wasn't a fool and certainly didn't believe in fairytales, but I'd bought into the officer's statement regarding the accident—lock, stock, and noose around my neck. There were far too many missing pieces, but I knew one thing for certain. My captor wasn't the seductive man he'd portrayed himself to be. He was a cold-blooded monster capable of vile things.

Ruthless.

Soulless.

I'd seen the look in his eyes, the blackened pathway leading to a remorseless man. Who was he, and what had Tristen done to him?

My God. The asshole had taken me like I already belonged to him, almost as if our sinful coupling was nothing more than a vicious game that he intended on winning. I bit back an involuntary cry, trying to keep my wits about me. I was exhausted and drained from the experience, the adrenaline rush from before all but nonexistent.

Tears formed in my eyes, and I took a deep breath, holding it.

Don't cry. Don't you dare cry. You can get through this.

Yes, I could. Then I'd crucify the bastard.

I took several deep breaths, fighting with myself until I found the courage to move to a sitting position. For some crazy reason, I was surprised I didn't have thick rope binding my wrists together, keeping me immobilized until the bastard was ready to make good on his threat. No, his promise. I hated the way another shiver skittered down my spine. As I took deep breaths, I searched the darkness, certain he was watching me. However, the dull throb remaining in my head indicated he'd drugged me. I pressed my hand across my forehead, continuing to shiver.

Maybe I just had the creepy-crawlies from being taken captive. A laugh bubbled to the surface, the fog in my head remaining. After he'd fucked me, I remembered he'd placed something over my mouth and nose. Chloroform? I was no expert in abduction 101, but given I remained nauseous, finding it difficult to concentrate, I'd venture a guess I was right.

Exhaustion still ruled my body, and I closed my eyes briefly, trying to reduce my pulse rate. Then I remembered a conversation I'd had with Tristen, one of the last before he died. Why was the memory plaguing me now?

"What are you doing?" Tristen demanded as he stormed into the living room.

I had his phone in my hand, already punching in the code. His behavior had been bizarre the last few weeks, so damn secretive that it had driven me crazy. When I'd asked, he'd said nothing was wrong, just a complicated case he was working on. But I'd known better. He was hiding something from me, and I was determined to find out what.

"I'm trying to figure out why your entire personality changed over the last two months. Why you won't talk to me about your work." My grasp on the phone was tight and I took two steps

backward, glaring at him. We'd had our share of fights over the months, but they'd escalated, his anger entirely different than before.

He took two long strides, ripping the phone from my hand then walking me to the wall. As he stood over me, his nostrils flared, his mouth twisting in rage and hatred. When he raised his arm, I thought for certain he was going to hit me.

"You know better than to touch my personal things!" Spittle flew from his mouth, the veins on the side of his neck pulsing.

"What the hell is wrong with you? I'm your fiancée. You should be able to confide in me."

Tristen remained hovering over me like a vulture for a full thirty seconds before shoving his phone into his pocket. The only reason I'd looked was that he'd been four hours late in getting to my house, and he'd yet to offer an explanation. I was used to his usual work overload and the excuse that a client came late, but the instant he'd walked into the door, I'd known something was off. He'd yet to take his suitcase into the bedroom or change out of his suit, which was abnormal. Something was terribly wrong.

"Confide?" He laughed, the sound unlike anything I'd ever heard. "That's never going to happen. However, I do need to be able to trust you. Whatever is going on with you, I can't handle it right now." He turned quickly, moving toward the door and grabbing his suitcase.

"Where are you going?" I was shocked, my mind a blur. What in the hell was wrong with him?

He opened the door then tilted his head, the look in his eyes terrifying me. "There are things you don't need to know, Sierra. I suggest you stop asking."

Then he'd walked out, slamming the door and I hadn't heard from him in a week. However, when he'd finally called, he'd been sweet, acting as if nothing had happened.

Then he'd sent me a dozen roses.

Just like...

I gasped audibly, jerking to a standing position. What in the hell was going on? I thought about what the monster had done to me, including ripping my clothes to shreds. As I slid my fingers down what I was wearing, I cringed, remembering he'd grabbed a dress from my closet, forcing me to put it on. Without any underwear. A wave of embarrassment skittered all the way down my body from the intensity of Alessandro's scent still covering my skin.

I wanted nothing more than to take a long, hot shower, scraping off his DNA. Why did I think his musky fragrance would remain, covering me like a warm blanket? I was barefoot, which I was certain he'd done on purpose.

Still shaking, I took a single step away from the bed, holding out my arms in order to try to feel my way around. Then I took another step. And another. I was certain I heard a noise. "Are you there?"

There was nothing but silence.

"You son of a bitch," I hissed. "I know you're there. What the hell is wrong with you and who the fuck are you?" My voice had raised several decibels by the end of the sentence and my ears rang from being lightheaded. I swayed slightly, still woozy from the drugs. The asshole wasn't going to answer me. Fuck him. I'd find a way out of here.

I shifted to the left, my foot hitting something. When I lowered my hand, I was able to run my fingers across a wooden piece of furniture. After a few seconds of exploration, I realized the huge mass was a chest of drawers. I was in a bedroom somewhere. Maybe that meant I could find a way to escape.

After taking several deep breaths, I continued my exploration, moving slowly so I wouldn't trip given my body's state of weakness. A few seconds later, I could swear I heard a scrape of something on the floor several feet away.

"Alessandro. What is this about? You called me for weeks, acting as if you cared about me. You said I was your salvation. What was that all about? From what I can tell, you're a gutless

coward.” My words were meant to anger him in order to bring him out in the open. Who cared if I was playing a dangerous game?

I shifted a little further, lifting my arms. What the hell was I feeling? I slid my hands across the rough texture until I found an edge. Then I felt nails. A board. My God. A piece of wood had been nailed. If I had to guess, I’d say the son of a bitch placed it across the window to block out all the light. He was a sick man.

“You’re so afraid a little woman will slip through your hands that you blocked out all light, attempting to eliminate her ability to escape? You’re a bigger fool than I originally thought.”

That’s it. Keep angering him.

“If you’re such a big man, why not show yourself. Tell me what this is really about.” I hesitated before shifting another couple of feet. “Just like I said before. You’re a loser, incapable of handling a situation with conversation or rational actions. If you’re trying to scare me, you’re failing miserably.”

The truth was, I was terrified, my bones aching from the thought I’d never get out of here alive. I managed to find the corner of the room and carefully placed one hand against the wall then the other as I made the turn, running into another piece of furniture hard enough I moaned. “Shit.” When I ran my fingers across the surface at eye level, I sensed there was a mirror. I turned around, ready to walk the other direction in order to find the door.

“You thought you could seduce me with your sensual words, pretending you were cut from the same cloth that I was. You’re nothing but a stalker, a vile criminal. You will be caught and you will be sent to prison.”

Did I just hear a chuckle? Goddamn the bastard.

I became bolder, moving more quickly, daring the asshole to taunt me. “Fuck you.” My frustration had reached a level I couldn’t ignore, anger boiling deep inside of me. This was

getting ridiculous. I hated games and it was obvious he loved them.

After taking another two steps, the sense that he was right there in front of me became a powerful set of vibrations. I swung out my arms, hoping I could slap him hard across the face.

“I’d be careful where you’re going, Sierra. There are dangers everywhere.” His deep voice resonated all the way into my soul, but not before jetting vibrations into my core.

I closed my eyes for a few seconds, encouraging my rage to come to the surface. “What. Do. You. Want?”

If my calculations were correct, he was four feet directly in front of me. When he didn’t answer right away, I lunged toward, flailing my arms.

The sharp, loud crash echoed in my ears, whatever I’d broken falling across my feet.

“Don’t make a single move, Sierra. Not one. If you disobey me, you will be punished but worse, you’ll be hurt.”

“Why the hell do you care if I’m hurt or not? You kidnapped me.” I heard his movement, then was shocked as a door was swung wide open. The light filtering into the room was instantly blinding and I threw my arm across my eyes to block out some of the light. Wincing, I was able to see his silhouette, just like I’d done in the bedroom. Then I heard his feet crunching down on whatever I’d shattered seconds before he yanked me into his arms.

I reacted immediately, pummeling my fists against his chest, managing to give him a hard punch in the jaw as I struggled to get out of his arms.

“Stop. Now!” he commanded, his voice booming.

“Not a chance in hell.” I continued swinging, my eyes fully accustomed to the light. When I slipped out of his arms, tumbling to the floor, I quickly managed to get to my knees, prepared to scamper away.

He fisted my hair, giving a hard yank, pain smashing into my head as he dragged me to my feet.

Alessandro growled as he slipped his arm around my waist, pinning my back against his chest. As he lowered his head, the feel of his hot breath trickling across my skin created far too many goosebumps dancing down my arms. My God. The man was hard, his cock pressing into my buttocks. “You’re a very bad girl. We need to work on that.”

“To hell with you,” I hissed, fighting his strong hold although the anguish pounding in my head stole my breath.

He laughed, the vibration of his voice tickling my ear. “You’ll learn soon enough there is no escape. Not now. Not ever.”

“Why are you doing this?”

“Because it’s necessary.”

“Not good enough.”

“You’ll be told what I want you to learn when I decide you’re ready.”

While he wasn’t threatening me, he was in full control, acting as if he already owned me. My mind continued to search for answers, the combination of anger and fear adding to the exhaustion. I was becoming too weak to fight him. I wanted to convince myself I was disgusted just hearing my captor’s voice, but I wasn’t. The sound was just as captivating as before, pushing me into the same lull I’d experienced on the phone and in my bistro. The irony was repulsive, driving me into a frenzied state of mind.

Alessandro took a deep breath, his hold on my hair lightening. “That’s better, *mi dulce gatita*.”

“What the hell are you calling me?”

He nipped my earlobe, sending another shower of sickening desire into my bloodstream. “My sweet kitten. Why don’t you purr for me?”

“Why don’t you drop dead?”

The asshole was obviously amused at my continued defiance. He walked me down the hallway into a kitchen. I was surprised at the hominess, the room a pleasant difference from the prison he'd shoved me into. He yanked out one of the chairs from the table, turning it around to face the hallway. Then he sat me down, placing my arms at my sides, leaning over so I was forced to look into his eyes.

They were even more soulless than I'd imagined, a stark yet effective reminder he was a monster in disguise, using his good looks as a weapon.

And they'd worked. I'd been foolish to fall for his method of seduction.

My breathing remained scattered as he gripped my chin between his thumb and forefinger. "There are rules to follow while we get to know each other, Sierra. As long as you do, then you'll begin to earn privileges. If you don't, the punishment you receive is something you'll remember for a long time. Do you understand me?"

I sucked in my breath, trying to maintain a somewhat rational state of mind. "Yes."

"Good. I'm going to clean up the mess you created. You're going to stay right here where I can see you. Then we'll have a nice chat."

He squeezed my chin for effect, the slice of discomfort a reminder that he was much bigger and stronger than I was. My God, the man was insanely gorgeous. Even now, my nipples hardened, aching for his touch. He held my gaze harshly for a few seconds, the darkness in his eyes startling.

It would be so easy to get lost in his eyes, to drown in the sexiness of the man as I had no doubt scores of other women had. But I wasn't like other women. I had a backbone. When my reaction was to laugh, his eyes turned cold for several seconds.

After he backed away, I took a few seconds to glance around the room, hoping to find a weapon. There was nothing on the counter of use, no knife block or heavy kitchen utensil.

Without being told where he'd taken me, I would have no way of knowing whether an attempt at escape was worth it or if I'd find anyone to help, but I had to risk it. Situations like this never ended without violence and bloodshed.

I watched as he gathered a broom and a dustpan, giving me another stern look before walking down the hall.

He'd changed clothes and was now wearing a tight pair of dark jeans and a matching ebony shirt. He appeared even more dangerous this way, commanding in every movement. I noticed how his jeans fit snugly against his buttocks, a split second of desire roaring through me. What was I thinking?

As soon as he walked into the darkened room, I scanned the area a second time, the doorway from the kitchen leading to what looked like an exterior door. I bit my lip to keep from making a single sound, craning my neck to see if he was looking at me. Whatever I'd broken was right next to the bedroom door, which kept him in eye contact range. Shit. This might be my only chance at attempting to get the hell away from him.

I studied his every move, cognizant of my body's treacherous reaction to him. I loathed the fact I was just as aroused by him as I'd been at the bistro when he'd held the book in his hand. I thought about the powerful kiss and pressed my fingers to my lips, remembering the closeness, the warmth of his body spreading through me like a wildfire. A flush of embarrassment crawled up from my neck when I involuntarily pressed my fingers across my lips.

My God. What was I doing?

The man was a killer, which was exactly what he'd do to me. This wasn't some game of fantasy. This was real life, filled with irrefutable consequences.

Sadly, I couldn't take my eyes off him.

No, this was a game to him. That was something I needed to keep fresh in my mind. I was a strong girl, refusing to give into anyone's bullshit. I could win this if I kept my head.

The moment he disappeared from my line of sight, I bolted toward the doorway, making it through without making a sound. I'd been right. The door led outside. It was still pitch black outside, which either meant he hadn't taken me far or I'd been out for a full day, I didn't care at this point. Getting away from him was the only thing on my mind.

I fumbled with the lock, holding my breath as I threw a glance over my shoulder. As soon as I turned the handle, I winced, hearing the single creak of the hinges. Then I wasted no time racing out the door into the night.

Tripping almost instantly, I tumbled down a set of stairs, hitting the ground with a hard thud. The wind knocked out of me, I gasped, clawing my way to a standing position, lumbering off. I made it at least six steps before he grabbed me, lifting me off my feet, crushing me against him so tightly I could no longer breathe.

"That wasn't very nice of you. You disobeyed me again," he half whispered. "You will be punished." The promise scared me to death. He dragged me backward and up the stairs and into the house, immediately turning me around to face him after closing the door.

His expression was entirely different than before, the darkness in his eyes raw and possessive, angry yet the hunger burning in his system was more powerful than anything else. The lion inside of him had claimed his prey, but the man held the ownership papers.

I was momentarily mesmerized by him, the exotic, woodsy scent filtering into my nostrils, slip-sliding all the way down to my toes. When he smiled, another chill coursed through me. Whatever he had in mind would lead to an additional nightmare.

"You are a beautiful woman, Sierra. You're also more courageous than I'd anticipated."

"You were hoping for a pushover?"

Smirking, he rubbed his knuckles down the side of my face, the touch far too intimate. I jerked my head away, which

clearly angered him, but the betrayal of my body continued, the scent of my desire floating between us.

He confirmed my suspicions by taking a deep breath, holding it in his lungs for several seconds before exhaling. “It’s going to be such a pleasure to take all of you, following through with the temptations we both experienced.”

“You’re crazy,” I whispered, shifting my body to try to gain some space. The only thing I accomplished was creating friction between us, his cock throbbing into my stomach. Vile thoughts slipped into my mind that I quickly shoved aside. I couldn’t think about him as anything but a horrible beast, a stalker turned killer. “Tell me why the hell you kidnapped me.”

He laughed as he released his hold, but I knew better than to try to get away from him. “Be careful what you ask for, Sierra. The truth is ugly, demanding, and will change your world including all your beliefs.”

“Try me. It couldn’t be any worse than being kidnapped by the likes of you. That is, if a man like you has any intention of telling me the truth.”

Alessandro’s eyes shimmered in the ugly fluorescent light, his voluptuous lips making it impossible to concentrate. “The truth is often what destroys us. As you’ve likely suspected, I run a very powerful mafia organization in New York. My family and I don’t take kindly to anyone who doesn’t play by our rules or chooses to enter into an adversarial scenario.”

“That means you kill them in cold blood. What does your illustrious job description have to do with me? I’ve never been to New York and now I know why I never bothered. There’s too much trash located in the city.” The mafia? I had been right about his identity. He was a killer, a horrible man who’d done inexplicable things. Unforgiving. Savage.

His smile made me sick inside. When he laughed, a cold sweat broke out across the back of my neck. He was enjoying every minute of toying with me. “How much did you know about your fiancé?”

“What do you mean?”

“What do I mean? My sweet kitten. What a shame to crack your glass house. Tristen Bradford worked for me. And before you ask, I’ll answer the question floating inside that beautiful mind of yours. Yes, he was a brutal man, capable of violence.”

“I don’t understand.” I could barely speak, my mind filled with ugly thoughts, wretched images. “That’s not true. That’s just...”

He chuckled as he’d done so many times before. “I’m afraid it is.”

He was taunting me. He had to be.

Remember... My inner voice was trying to connect the dots.

“What does it matter? He’s dead. Someone killed him.”

When he cocked his head, it seemed all time stood still, the air in the room sucked out. The moment he answered, I was forced to accept I’d lived a lie.

“I haven’t had the pleasure of acting on his required punishment. But I will.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Your fiancé, the attorney for my family, is very much alive. And you’re going to help me drag him out from the hole he crawled into.”

CHAPTER 9



*A*lessandro

Time was a strange tool. It could be manipulated, caressed, and often became a healing mechanism, but it could never be altered.

Seconds ticked by as Sierra processed what I'd allowed her to learn. There was no instant reaction of rebuttal or fear. There were no tears or assertion that I was wrong. There was a wide-eyed surprise for a few seconds then a full acceptance that what I'd told her was the truth.

That meant she'd already suspected something was off about the man she believed she loved. I could tell the time researching her during the month after my release, delving into as much of her private life as I'd been able to find, had been productive.

Her personal and private endeavors had been an open book.

No pun intended.

There were no gray areas in her past or present, no breaking laws or refusal to pay her taxes. She came from an upscale but not wealthy dignified family in Pennsylvania, her older sister a doctor, her younger brother a computer programmer for a gaming firm. By all outward appearances, her parents appeared happy, married for forty years.

Sierra had graduated college near her hometown with a degree in finance, working in a bookstore until she was twenty-one,

then shifting her attention to being employed by a winery for almost four years. She'd saved money, researching locations in the United States to open her own store and had spent four years trying to make a go of Corks and Books.

Somewhere after her move to Raleigh, North Carolina, she'd met and fallen in love with Tristen. Why and how I had yet to be able to determine, but the timing would indicate he'd been in my employ for two years prior to their meeting. Had his need to find an innocent girl been the driving factor, falling in love with her quirky personality and stunning good looks? I'd known men who'd sold their souls for less, so it was entirely possible.

However, I would maintain she held a key to his discovery. What I needed to ascertain was whether she'd been in contact after his demise. If so, I'd be forced to end our budding relationship after he was located. If not... The possibilities were endless. It would all depend on if she could be handled.

Training her started right now. Her disobedience would not be tolerated.

"What did you say to me?" she asked, her inflections more timid than I was used to. The woman had a strength inside of her that surprised and pleased me. Weakness I loathed, including in women. While I'd never allowed a female to be the victim of an extermination, her compliance was required.

"You heard me, Sierra. I've long suspected that Tristen was alive."

She fisted her hands, a clear indication she was having a hard time grappling with the news.

"What did he do to you to make you hunt him?" She looked away, her brow furrowed.

Hunt. At least she'd found the appropriate word. I pushed her gently into the kitchen, moving almost immediately toward the bottle of scotch I'd stashed in one of the cabinets. I'd purchased the cabin completely furnished a couple hundred miles away from her house for no other reason than being able

to bring her here for interrogation. The time alone I hoped would prove to be fruitful.

I poured two glasses, pointing to one of the chairs. At least at this point all I needed to do was give her a stern look and she eased onto the seat, her hands shaking. Good. I wanted her scared of me. That would help keep her compliant.

For now.

However, I knew better than to turn my back on her again.

I shoved the glass in front of her, keeping my expression the same until she wrapped her fingers around it. She was more subdued than before, but it was only a matter of time until my little kitten turned into the lioness I'd already witnessed. Being honest with her was a necessity.

“Tristen was almost solely responsible for stealing not only money from my organization but documents that allowed the FBI to arrest me for extortion. I spent four long, hard years behind bars because of his betrayal. As you might imagine, the time spent in a six-by-six-foot cell did nothing but infect the wound.”

She tilted her head, her eyes searching mine. If it was for truth or something else, I wasn't certain. “You're lying.”

Laughing, I lifted my drink, staring at the cheap glass as filthy thoughts shoved the requirement for garnering information aside. There would be time to find out every aspect of what she knew. From what I could tell so far, she'd been clueless. Was that possible in today's culture where almost anything could be found on the internet? Maybe she hadn't wanted to learn the truth for fear of upsetting her organized life.

The primal urges soaring through me refused to be denied. “I'm not in a habit of lying, Sierra. That's something you'll come to understand. Your fiancé attempted to destroy my life as well as that of my family.”

“So, now you're determined to destroy mine.” She shoved her drink away, using enough force the tumbler almost toppled over the edge.

I grabbed it, slamming it onto the counter. Then I swallowed every drop of mine before tossing the glass aside, enjoying the cracking sound as it tumbled against the wall. "I'm doing exactly what is required in my line of business, protecting my own."

Her defiant look aroused me more than it had before. I would enjoy taking what already belonged to me.

"You're nothing but a criminal, indecent and violent," she said, her jaw tightening.

"Indecent. Quite frankly, I've been called many things but that is new. Perhaps I am. That doesn't change the fact you're a very naughty girl and it's time I do something about it."

She stiffened, her fingers digging into the edge of the cheap wooden table as she rose to her feet. "Fuck you."

"That will come soon enough, and I have no doubt the second time will be even sweeter." I walked closer, prepared for her to bolt. She simply stood her ground. If her eyes had held lasers, I'd have been drilled into ash. That added to the desire that continued to build. "Undress."

"Over my dead body."

"That can be arranged, but it would be such a pity to rid the world of such a beautiful creature."

Sierra laughed then caught herself, shaking her head. "I don't have any information for you and even if I knew where the asshole was, I wouldn't tell you."

"I assure you that you will in time. As I just said, undress. If I need to ask you again, your punishment will be much worse."

I continued to admire her chutzpa, her eyes reflecting the hatred she felt for me, but the scent of her fear continued to waft into my nostrils along with the intensity of her desire. The electricity we shared was palpable, and I had difficulty thinking clearly around her. After bringing her inside the house, placing her on the bed after our arrival, I'd remained in the chair close by for almost two hours listening to her soft breathing.

Maybe I did have a conscience after all. My concern that I'd dosed her too heavily had remained in the back of my mind. After fucking her at her house, she'd done everything in her power to get away, forcing me to take more stringent methods of handling her. I hadn't lied to her. I was a very bad man capable of initiating torturous methods of violence, but never against a woman. That was the one thing my mother had instilled in the beginning, refusing to allow me to become an abusive man.

The irony often brought a chuckle. She'd grown accustomed to my father's vile methods of dealing with enemies, embracing the fact her two sons would turn into carbon copies, yet had counseled both of us on the appropriate ways to handle a woman.

I would likely disappoint her today given my plans for the beautiful woman standing in front of me.

After giving me a hard look, she lowered her head, fiddling with the dress I'd forced her to wear. While I hadn't given it any thought, the lovely purple slip of material hugged her every curve, accentuating my prize. My mouth watered as I watched her tugging it over her head, her lower lip quivering while she attempted to remain strong. She threw me another hateful look, her cheeks reddening from embarrassment.

Exhaling, I reached for my belt buckle, and she instantly noticed what I was doing, her breath skipping. It was obvious that other than the spanking I'd given her hours before, she'd never been disciplined in this manner. I'd found it the only way to handle a naughty vixen.

She murmured under her breath as she covered her breasts with her arms, avoiding eye contact at all costs. Her action highlighted her shyness, which fueled my hunger even more.

"Turn around," I commanded, keeping my voice emotionless.

"I will not." As soon as she whispered the words, she shook her head. She was an intelligent woman, more so than most. I'd sensed complete recognition once I'd provided my full name. Our family had been in and out of the news for years, including several stories reaching national attention. She knew

what she could expect and how I handled business. Yet she refused to give in easily.

That only made me want her even more.

Resigned, she shifted in order to face me, holding her head high. Goddamn, she was the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen.

“Lie over the edge of the table.”

I sensed the words ‘fuck you’ were on the tip of her tongue, but she stopped herself just before the words left her mouth. With her hands fisted, she followed my orders, easing over the table, her breathing just as ragged as before.

“I would keep in mind that there is nowhere for you to run. Once the sun comes up, you’ll see we’re in a remote wooded area. There is no one around us, Sierra, no possible way of getting away from me. As I mentioned to you before, I’m the single man who can provide you with what you need. Either it can be extremely pleasurable, or it can be riddled with excruciating anguish. The choice is entirely up to you. This is your new life, your ultimate destiny.”

She lifted her head long enough to smirk. “You mean this is my death. As far as I can tell, my life is already over. I know your kind, filthy men who order men to do their dirty work. How many soldiers do you have protecting the grounds outside? Five? Ten? Since you’re such an important man, I’m certain you need at least several in order to kiss your feet and clean your ass.”

While her antics and caustic words were amusing, I was losing patience with her. I pulled the thick leather under my nose, taking a deep whiff in order to control my anger. The spanking I was prepared to provide was a lesson, fulfilling my sadistic needs.

“My importance means nothing at this moment. However, I suggest you remember your place by my side.”

“You mean underneath you. Right?”

The woman had the kind of moxie that could ultimately get her killed. I walked around the table and as I did, I brushed my

fingers through her long hair, moving it to the side. I wanted to see her face when I cracked my belt across her rounded bottom. I needed to experience her anguish, another taste of my control. My cock pressed hard against my jeans, the ache almost as significant as what she'd feel in a few precious minutes.

She shuddered as I rolled the rough pads of my fingers down her arm, taking my time to slide them to the small of her back. The touch of her skin was incredible, as if I was indulging in fingering the wings of a dove. My pulse raced, my muscles tightening as I studied her porcelain face, basking in her long eyelashes and the way her lips remained pursed. When I patted her buttocks, she sucked in her breath, her toes curling.

I slipped my fingers down the crack of her ass, smiling at the fact that I'd take her in her dark hole tonight. Every inch of her belonged to me. The sooner she accepted that, the better.

As I stood back, she threw me another look over her shoulder. I suspected it wouldn't be her last.

I cracked the belt against the floor once, her breathless whimper adding to the fire raging within. Then I smacked her bottom four times in rapid succession, hitting her across the sit spot every time.

She jerked up, gasping for air, her body shaking even more violently. I pressed my hand against her back, easing her down and caressing her bottom. Soon, her soft skin would bear my marks, if only for a little while. After I provided six more strokes, she kicked out, rolling over onto her hip.

“Stay in position.”

“I will kill you one day.” Her bold statement caught me off guard, and I burst into laughter.

“I don't doubt you'll try, and you'll fail just like others have.”

“Yeah? Well, I'm not those others. I'll become your worst nightmare.”

The woman knew how to turn a man on. I continued the spanking, cracking three across her upper thighs. Then I indulged in her scent for several seconds before sliding her

legs apart, allowing me to catch a glimpse of her swollen, pretty pink pussy lips. I was thirsty and only her delicious juice could quench my parched throat.

She bit back several whimpers as I eased my hand between her legs, toying with her clit. “You’re very wet, *mi dulce gatita*.”

“Not because of you.”

“I beg to differ.” After thrusting a single finger inside her tight channel, I closed my eyes briefly. That allowed the filthy images that had remained in my mind after tasting her to rush to the surface, the need to fuck her becoming all consuming.

I’d watched her.

Studied her.

Hungered for her.

Captured her.

Now I planned on spending days devouring her.

The thought tightened my balls as I moved around the edge of the table. “Open your mouth.”

“No.”

She was constantly looking for affirmation from me, although there was so much emotion behind her ice blue eyes, a level of confusion she didn’t understand. How could she want me? I could tell that was running through her mind. The answer was simple. The intensity of our needs was a twisted reminder of the darkness of our genes. Hungers that would chase others away only further enticed us. I’d found my equal in the form of passion.

I didn’t hesitate to shove my finger past her lips, forcing her to suck the juice from every inch. At first, she acted mortified then angry, then her longing to surrender took over if only for a few seconds. As she sucked, pulling my finger all the way into her mouth, I was forced to take several deep breaths.

After pulling away, I rolled my finger across my lips before returning to the round of discipline. I decided on fifteen more,

doling six out then sliding my fingers across her heated bottom.

She was still quivering, her lips pursed as she tried to hold in her reaction. When she noticed I was looking at her, she snorted, closing her eyes on purpose. I teased her again, rubbing my thumb around her clit several times before dragging it down the length of her pussy, sliding it very slowly up the crack of her ass. As expected, she clenched her muscles, her legs tensing as she realized very soon I would breach her dark hole.

I smacked her backside two more times, languishing in the slight but beautiful blush erupting like a bloom of fresh flowers across her skin.

She bucked a few times, tossing her head back and forth.

Every move she made further ignited the darkness within me.

After taking multiple deep breaths, I brought the leather strap down, providing the final strikes, my aim utter perfection. I'd wanted to make sure each one had provided enough anguish she'd think twice about escaping. If not, she'd endure an entirely different kind of pain.

One of loneliness.

Her cry of fury, indignation, and pain couldn't stop the cravings I had.

To subdue her.

To make her submit.

To drive her to acceptance.

"You did very well," I growled.

"You're an asshole."

"Without a doubt." While this wasn't about romance and never would be, she'd earned the right to feel the bliss of ecstasy. Adrenaline pulsed through my veins, pushing both my levels of excitement and need to the point I couldn't hold back much longer. I widened her legs, lifting her pelvis off the table as I bent down, indulging my thirst in an initial taste. As soon as I

thrust my tongue inside her wetness, she pushed up from the table, wiggling until she was grinding her pussy into my face.

“Get off me,” she huffed.

“That’s not going to happen, and you know it.”

Sierra continued undulating her hips back and forth until I gripped both sides of her buttocks, holding her in position as well as digging my nails into her skin.

“Oh. Oh...” Her moans added additional gasoline to the flames, the white-hot heat of our combined desire threatening to combust. Within seconds, she was writhing against the table, her back heaving from her exaggerated breaths.

The taste of her was damning me to hell, making all my filthy thoughts embroiled in brutal sin. I split her wide open, teasing her asshole with a single finger while I lapped up her cream. Every sound I made was animalistic, a reminder that the predator needed to feed.

Panting, she pressed her face into the table, kicking her calves against the edge. I sensed she was close to a mind-blowing orgasm and refused to stop, feasting on her hungrily as she wiggled, bucking her body against my firm hold.

“Oh, God. Oh... Yes. Yes.”

I licked her furiously, finally plunging several of my fingers inside, curling the tips. That’s all she could take, her body jerking several times before she exploded in my mouth, filling my throat with her juice.

“Uh. Uh. Uh. Uh. Uh.” Her body trembled and she pressed her hands on the table, lifting her head, my little kitten purring as I’d wanted her to do earlier.

“Mmm...” I murmured as I blew several swaths of hot air from one side of her inner thigh to the other. In my world, one could never be enough. I wanted her wet and sated, no longer fighting the inevitable. I continued my feast, sucking on her clit as I lifted her further off the table.

She kept her eyes closed, biting back another cry. I was forced to shift back and forth, my cock’s discomfort entirely too

painful. I used my tongue and several fingers to drive her to the point of another climax within seconds, but only after I thrust my thumb deep inside her dark hole.

Her ragged scream gave me an inward smile. Only when she stopped shaking did I pull away. For tonight, the game playing was finished. This was no longer about her required obedience but fulfilling a hunger that demanded satisfaction. I scooped her into my arms, tossing her over my shoulder and heading for the stairs.

“Let me go.” She pummeled my back then scraped her long nails across my skin when I didn’t respond.

“Fight me, sweet kitten. That only turns me on even more.”

“You’re a son of a bitch.”

“Keep talking, sweetheart. Soon, I’ll fill your mouth with something nice and thick.”

I took the stairs two at a time, my heart thudding against my chest.

Her actions created a primal surge from deep within, the kind of aching need that swept through me like a tidal wave. It was difficult to comprehend why this woman ignited the dark passion within me, but there was no denying my intense yearning.

Even if what I was doing would challenge my return or leadership, I didn’t give a shit at this point.

She was mine.

Let another man dare attempt to take her away and they would face the kind of wrath that would leave them begging for death.

As soon as I stormed into the bedroom, I flicked on a single light on the dresser, wasting no time tossing her onto the bed. She’d continued fighting me on the stairs, almost managing to slide out of my hold. The second her body hit the bed, she bolted up, scampering quickly to the other side.

Nothing with her should have surprised me any longer, but when she yanked a lamp from the nightstand, tossing it in my

direction, all I could do was laugh. The old clock radio was next, the hard plastic smashing against the side of my head. Before I had a chance to recover, she'd opened the drawer, finding whatever had been left inside, pitching the items one after the other.

Still amused, I took long strides around to the other side, forced to duck when she came at me with her fist. I grabbed her around the waist, pitching us both onto the bed, pressing my full weight across her still wiggling body.

The girl was stronger than she looked, refusing to give in. While she gasped, she wasn't finished yet, somehow managing to get her leg from under me, awkwardly kicking me behind the knee with her foot. Now I'd had enough. When I yanked both her arms over her head, easily able to secure them with the fingers of one hand, she hissed, cursing at me in what sounded like several languages.

Yet the moment I wrapped my other hand around her throat, she opened her lovely doe eyes wide, venom and hatred prickling the beautiful flecks of silver rimming her irises.

"I hate you," she managed, her chest rising and falling as she lifted her chin even higher.

"Hate me all you want, Sierra. Soon, you'll learn to love to use the anger you feel for me to fuel the rapture rushing through every cell and muscle."

"Don't kid yourself. You're not that good."

If she thought she'd manage to insult me, she'd sorely underestimated the kind of man I'd been forced to become. I could tell she decided to hold back whatever vitriol that was burning behind her voluptuous lips, instead clamping them shut while continuing her glare.

In my mind I knew she'd finally figured out she was going nowhere.

I took several deep breaths as I rubbed my thumb across her chin and felt the rapid pulse of the vein coursing down her neck. When I lowered my head, she closed her eyes as before, choosing to ignore my advances.

“Leave me alone,” she whispered with no conviction.

“You know that’s not going to happen.” I brushed my lips across her chin, moving from one side to the other. Then I rolled them down the column of her neck, taking my time to drag my tongue across her skin.

She stiffened underneath me, shifting her hips back and forth. After I released my hold on her neck, her eyelids fluttered open. Her body continued to tremble with impotent fury, but as soon as I rubbed my fingers down her arm ever so slowly, I sensed not only that she was relaxing, but also enjoying the feathered touch.

I was the kind of man who’d never thoroughly enjoyed pleasing a woman, although I’d spent time honing my skills over the years. But at this moment, I wanted my sweet kitten to feel the full power of every inch of her being aroused, the time taken to provide the ultimate satisfaction. She’d broken through barriers earlier on, her enticing ways making her impossible to resist.

There was nothing like the feel of her skin against my fingertips, the heat we shared searing the edges. As she tossed her head from side to side, I licked down to the cleft of her breast, allowing hot air to cascade against her skin. “You hunger, the dark and filthy needs you’ve desired rushing to the surface. Every call was enticing but you wanted more. Isn’t that true?”

“No,” she moaned, twisting her lovely mouth, fighting with everything she had to ignore her body’s reaction.

“You can try and deny it, yet your body betrays you once again. Tell me.”

“No. I just...” Unable to finish her sentence, she darted a glance in my direction, her eyes glassy.

“You just what, couldn’t bring yourself to toss aside the good girl complex? You couldn’t handle anything but the continued pretending that the questions hadn’t aroused you to the point your panties were damp after every call?”

“Stop it.”

“Why? Is that what you really want?”

She opened her mouth, her eyes shimmering with increased lust.

“Tell me!”

“No.”

“Mmm... Then what do you crave?” I shook my head, trying to keep my patience. “Tell. Me.”

She twisted her face before being able to answer. “Fuck me.” For the first time, her voice was small, as if by admitting her needs she’d soon burn in hell.

What I’d neglected to tell her before was that she’d soon learn she was guilty by association, tainted for the rest of her life.

“Good girl. You’ll have everything you want.” When I pulled my hands away from her wrists, she stared at me wide-eyed once again, still searching to try to find my soul. Good luck with that. When she started to lower her hands, I tweaked her nipple. “Keep them over your head, Sierra.”

I pulled back, straddling her legs, flicking my fingers back and forth across her nipples. The fact her blushing rose nipples were fully aroused, hard like perfect diamonds, was just another sign of her growing desire. I gathered another whiff of her sweet pussy, the taste lingering in my mouth pushing my dark needs closer to the surface.

Electricity surged through me as I lowered my head, darting my tongue around her hardened bud, growling from the pinched expression crossing her face. I nipped the tender flesh, sucking until I was rewarded with a slight whimper, the sound like sweet music.

Cupping her other breast, I pinched the tip between my thumb and forefinger, twisting and pulling. Her legs flailed, but to her credit, she remained obedient, struggling to keep her arms over her head.

I shifted my attention to her other nipple, sucking and biting down. Her mouth opened into a perfect O, her eyes once again closed tightly. Seeing her enjoying the throes of

passion had a profound effect on me. I'd never been accused of being gentle, but I was enjoying being able to take the time to savor every moment of experiencing her voluptuous body.

Who knew when I'd be given the opportunity again? There was business to deal with that couldn't be kept waiting any longer. It was time to initiate the first wave of revenge.

When I crawled off the bed, almost immediately she looked for me, lifting her head, her eyes darting back and forth.

As I moved closer to the dresser, I heard her shift, fully expecting she'd ignored my command. While pleasantly surprised she'd only eased onto her side, I sensed she was dipping into an entirely different kind of darkness.

"Why are you doing this?" she asked again, as if the answer would be any different.

"Because you're going to be the reason Tristen comes out into the open."

"Then what are you going to do?"

"I think you know that answer already." As I took off my watch, placing it next to my Beretta, I sensed she was looking at me again, memorizing every move I made. I'd had the watch since I'd graduated, one of only a few pieces of jewelry I owned, the black onyx ring the only piece that never left my body.

Cruz had one just like, it, the ring a symbol of our family's power, the thick obsidian jewel surrounded by rubies, which was the birthstone of my mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother in a twist of fate. Oddly enough, my captured kitten had been born in late July, which seemed to indicate I'd found the right woman to enter into a more permanent relationship with. It was bullshit, both the tradition and the unusual myth that had followed my family's lineage for generations. No woman would ever be accepted into the family unless born in late July or early August.

I almost laughed given Cruz believed if one of us broke the tradition, it would bring bad luck to our entire family as well as to the organization itself. When I glanced in her direction

after removing my shirt, I saw a new sense of fear in her eyes. While I wanted her frightened of me, at least for now, I had a feeling her concern was still wrapped around a man who'd obviously not loved her enough to trust her with who and what he really was.

At least she knew the man who was about to defile her in the most carnal ways. I never lied about who I was, appreciating when I put the fear of God into either man or woman. Why I was thinking that she was anything more than an end to fulfilling a long-awaited need was digging into my mind like a ragged, rusty knife.

Maybe stalking her hadn't been in my best interest.

"I didn't know him at all. Did I?" she asked quietly.

"No, you didn't." If she was waiting for an apology for the fact I'd destroyed whatever precious memories she had of him, hell would freeze over first.

I placed the phone next to my weapon, taking a deep breath. She'd undoubtedly try to escape. I would be curious as to how she made the attempt.

She sat up on the bed the moment I was fully undressed, staring at me, her eyes shimmering. Upon first glance, I thought they were tears, but almost instantly I realized the luminescent quality was from heightened lust.

Sierra took several shallow breaths, her gaze falling from my chest to my abs, then finally to my fully engorged cock, my swollen balls that begged for relief. She was fighting her wants, refusing to accept what her body continued to cry out for. The woman had no idea what she was doing to me. I'd broken far too many of the rules I'd imposed on myself, languishing in a game that had turned into something else altogether. I couldn't put a finger on it, but at this point I wouldn't be able to let her go.

However, it would take time to tame her, to reinforce rules and requirements. Could I take the time needed, provide the diligent training? My thoughts drifted briefly to what Cruz had mentioned. Weakness.

I couldn't allow the burning desire to overwhelm me. Not for a second. If that happened, I could lose everything I'd worked so hard to achieve.

As soon as I advanced, she seemed to realize that she'd forgotten the other single command I'd given her, and she immediately lay down on the bed, jerking her arms over her head. Her breathing was as ragged as before, the slight tremor creating goosebumps along almost every inch of skin. As I crawled onto the comforter, she squeezed her hands around the bedding, twisting them back and forth.

"Now, I fuck you. First, your wet pussy. Then your tight little ass."

"I will never obey you, not willingly," she insisted, her body tensing again.

I took my time positioning myself between her legs, pressing the tip of my cock against her swollen folds, holding my body above hers as I peered down.

"Remember, *mi dulce gatita*, it's your choice to make and it depends entirely on your willingness to obey me. Agony or ecstasy." The sadistic hunger that had exploded from the moment she'd answered her phone took over, and I thrust the entire length of my shaft inside. Although she mewed her disapproval, her pussy muscles clamped around the thick invasion immediately, pulling me deeper inside.

"Do what you want, Alessandro, but I'll never surrender willingly."

I pulled out, plunging into her again. When she arched her back, I took a deep breath. "You already are."

Leaning down, I crushed my mouth over hers, immediately slipping my tongue inside. The taste of her was even sweeter than before, yanking on the darkest desires that I'd tried to keep locked away. Soon, she would shatter the box itself, allowing the beast to surface.

Then she'd learn that she'd soon be forced to make a deal with the devil.

Soon she would be begging for more, her hunger becoming insatiable until it was all she could think about.

Soon she would surrender in every way, body and soul, her dark needs consuming her thoughts.

Soon she would fully comprehend the power of a dangerous man.

And after that?

Only time would tell.

CHAPTER 10



*S*ierra

I hated him.

Hated.

Loathed.

You want him. You crave him. You've longed for his touch for months.

No. I couldn't go down that rabbit hole again.

Yet Alessandro was right, my body refusing to listen to my mind or emotions, the cravings already so intense that with a single touch of his finger, I was provided with a taste of heaven.

And I wanted more.

As the kiss roared into a feral moment, I struggled to keep my arms over my head. To obey him like a good little girl. His exotic scent lingered, staining me as his cum would do soon enough. I was already intoxicated and the way he dominated my tongue left me breathless, my mind spinning.

Dark.

Dangerous.

Delicious.

The three words continued to float in my mind, crushing everything else that I'd been thinking. Maybe I was still under

the influence of the drugs, but all I wanted to think about was him. His touch. His kiss. The feel of his thick cock pushing against my pussy walls. My muscles ached from his huge girth, fighting to take back control even though I knew there was no chance.

He'd tormented me, teased the woman inside for weeks, finding the right way to slide in through a crack in my armor. The fact he'd stalked me didn't bother me nearly as much as the way his actions created conflicting reactions both in my mind and body. All I wanted to do was place my hands on his chest, to knead his chiseled muscles.

Seeing him in the light had taken my breath away. He was sculpted, so muscular that there wasn't a single ounce of fat on his body. I hadn't noticed the tattoo on his chest, the outstretched wings of a bird covering every inch of skin. It was beautiful in design, intricate in detail.

As beautiful as his body was, his face was what kept me tingling all over, his sensual accent a close second. If he were any other man, I'd be thrilled to have this kind of attention.

But he wasn't like any other man.

He was evil personified in a perfect box. He'd managed to crawl under the most sensitive areas of my skin, forging a path not only into the darkness I'd harbored inside, but the intense longing that I'd done my best to squelch over the years. He'd not just opened wounds, he'd used them in a seductive, thrilling way that I wasn't certain I could ignore.

I'd tried so hard to fight him, but he was far too strong, anticipating my every move. I'd never be able to get away from him. Where did that leave me? The kiss was just another brutal way of taking me, claiming me as his.

Every sound he made, every primal growl sent wave after wave of tingles throughout my body. He'd awakened such intense need that I was blinded by the bright power of him.

But his eyes remained dark, the glimpse into his soul as terrifying as the man himself. What he'd told me confused the hell out of me. I would never in a thousand years believe that

Tristen was a criminal. A killer? No way. Or was it possible? What could I tell Alessandro that would keep him from killing me?

I bucked my hips against him, my body reacting involuntarily, the sensations rocketing through me far too intense. Excitement and continued hunger powered through me, knocking out all sense of rationality. There wasn't a single muscle in my body that wasn't trembling from his rough touch. My bottom was on fire, every scrape of the bedding a wretched reminder that he would discipline me long and hard for any infraction. Even worse, my heart was racing, my cells erupting from the firepower of heat, electricity surging to the point every nerve ending was seared.

When he broke the kiss, he nipped my lower lip, continuing to drive his cock deep inside. The force slammed the bed against the wall, the sound mixing with his husky growls, the quiet whimpers that I continued to try to curtail.

He leaned back, staring at me intently, a wry smile on his face that I wanted to wipe off. This man was a true monster in every sense of the word. How many men had he killed in his career, how many more would die by his hands? That's what I needed to concentrate on, not the sickness furrowing inside of me, unwanted desire that threatened to allow what he wanted.

My full surrender.

Had I always craved a dominating man? The answer was obvious, although I hadn't faced it until now. But this wouldn't be the man. There was no way I could trust him. Ever.

He continued the savage fucking, pulling out and slamming into me again and again. I fought the tingling sensations, the building of another climax. His mouth had tormented my tender tissue easily, but here I had more control.

Or did I?

Our bodies molded together, the weight of his soothing. As the hard fucking continued, I found it difficult to block the increasing sensations, the red-hot heat that was building to a crescendo.

I looked away, biting back every cry threatening to give away my pleasure, but he was having none of it.

“Look at me, Sierra. Never take your eyes off me.”

His command was so powerful, the timbre slicing a round of fear into my system. I did what he wanted, staring him in the eyes with all the venom I could gather together. He refused to stop, pushing me harder, peeling away layer after layer of my inhibitions, just like he'd done with the phone calls.

Within seconds, I was panting, unable to catch my breath as an orgasm threatened to drive me straight into another round of bliss.

“That's it, sweet kitten. Come for me.”

I hated and adored the darkness in his voice, the way his husky tone managed to caress every inch of my body. Shock and embarrassment rode me hard, the realization that I was deriving absolute pleasure from his savagery pushing me to the brink of losing faith in myself.

That was the very moment another climax roared through me, the tidal wave effect leaving me breathless, stars floating in front of my eyes. I didn't realize a scream had erupted from my lips until I heard the reverberations.

“Good girl. Yes, my beautiful *gatita*.”

I didn't want to be his anything, but his words accentuated the freeing feeling as a single orgasm morphed into a second, this one even more powerful.

“Oh. Oh...” I hated the sound of my voice, the cry I issued in pleasure, just as he'd wanted. He'd already learned enough about my body to control my reaction to him. I hated him even more.

When he slowed his rhythm, pulling almost all the way out then sliding in as if I was a delicate flower, he brushed his jaw across my cheek to my ear. Even the way the stubble of his slight beard scratched my skin left me breathless, my nipples aching. As he whispered into my ear, the seductive tone smooth and velvety, stars floated in front of my eyes, twinkling brightly.

“You *are* my salvation.”

The first night he'd said those same words, confusing me as to why. I'd had no understanding of them until now. Nothing was real any longer. Not the way I'd wanted to feel about him, or the fear. Not even the reality that my life was in his hands. There was no time or space, no understanding of my past or what the future might bring.

Would he force me to endure horrors when he realized I couldn't provide him with answers? Would he dump me on the side of the road after he was finished, treating me like trash? There were no answers that made any sense at this point.

I lolled my head to the side, trying to control my breathing as the tingling sensations started to ease.

He refused to stop, fucking me as long and hard as he'd spanked me before. I'd forgotten my place already until he gripped my jaw, yanking my head back to face him. There was no light in his eyes, only a need that couldn't be described. I was shocked how mesmerizing they'd become, or maybe I was trying to desperately find an ounce of humanity inside him. I couldn't be certain of anything or trust my own instincts. Not after the way he'd fooled me.

“Such a bad girl,” he huffed and without warning, he pulled out completely, crawling off the end of the bed. I thought he'd become disgusted with me, prepared to force me back to my dark room for another round of penance.

When he yanked me to the end by my ankle, flipping me over onto all fours, I instantly tried to crawl away. He dragged me back, smacking my aching bottom three times in rapid succession, another long, dark growl pulsing up from his throat.

“We aren't done yet, sweet kitten. Now, I fuck you in the ass.”

As chilling as the words were, they were also deliciously filthy, enticing the woman I'd been hiding into breaching the surface. Panting, I clawed the bed, grabbing a handful of the comforter. What did I think I was doing, holding onto something? I wanted to laugh and cry at the same time but

when he shoved his fingers into my wetness, I gasped as another beautiful moment of pleasure rolled through me. I bucked hard, riding the intrusion, savoring a fantasy as if it was real.

But I should have known the blissful moment would be short lived. When he slid the same fingers down the crack of my ass, I tensed, blinking several times. This just couldn't be happening. He caressed my bottom with one hand as he slid his juice-soaked fingers into my tight hole.

As I hung my head in shame, heat flushing my system, I had no strength or fortitude left. He'd all but devoured me, releasing the very darkness he'd talked about during our conversations. I opened my legs wider, pushing up from the bed and arching my back. I was giving in, providing permission for him to do whatever he wanted in the vilest of manners.

He cracked his hand against my buttocks three more times. Then I felt pressure as he placed the tip of his cock against my dark hole. I could hear myself whimpering, the rapid beating of my heart lurching into my throat. He was nothing like I'd expected.

Alessandro, my dark stranger, was so much more.

"Breathe for me, sweet kitten. Tonight is all about revelations," he whispered, the tone dripping with innuendoes, provoking a side of me I hadn't known existed. When he pressed the tip inside, I tensed, biting my lip as a series of bright lights flashed across my field of vision.

His grip on my hip was firm, his fingers digging in. As he'd done before, he fisted my hair, holding me in place as he slowly slid another few inches inside. The pain was blinding, yet a shower of vibrations jetted through every vein and muscle. The fact that my muscles were stretching, accepting what I'd never believed I could want was an incredibly freeing feeling. He'd wanted me uninhibited, giving of myself freely.

And that's exactly what was happening whether I wanted it or not.

Alessandro's breathing was as ragged as mine as he thrust the remainder of his cock inside. I couldn't hold back a strangled scream, the anguish shooting down my legs, but within seconds, his actions became a rush of sheer joy. The caustic pleasure coursing through me was unlike anything I'd ever experienced. How could I want this?

There was no logical answer, but I wasn't certain my life would ever be the same.

"That's it," he cooed, his velveteen voice skittering through me. "Relax. This is going to feel so damn good."

I'd never believed something so dirty could enhance the sensations to the point my pussy ached. I lifted my hand, involuntarily shifting my fingers to my clit, rolling the tips around the swollen bud as he pulled out, slamming into me again. He held such power in his hands, yet he was gentle in his actions, repeating the move as my muscles finally accepted him. Seconds later, they relaxed to the point I no longer felt any discomfort.

I closed my eyes as I stroked my clit, continuously rolling my finger aimlessly as he started to fuck me in long, even strokes. As he yanked on my hair, I uttered several cries, the sound unrecognizable.

"That's it. Open up for me. Show me how much you've craved being taken by a beast."

His words were startling and frank, and they added to the enticement.

Then he developed a rhythm, pounding into me with wild abandon, taking exactly what he wanted. The moment shared was raw and unforgiving, but the pleasure he was bringing was indescribable. I rocked with him, still touching myself, finally thrusting my fingers inside my aching pussy. I was so wet, juice staining my thighs, the scent thick in the air.

"So fucking tight. Perfect."

He gripped my hips, thrusting harder. There wasn't a cell or muscle, tendon or synapse that wasn't on fire, tiny sparks

fluttering all throughout my body. I could no longer breathe, my heart hammering to the point I fell into a dark abyss.

But the pleasure was incredible, sensations that had never been alive awakened as if from a deep slumber.

There was no sense in overthinking what we were doing. This was nothing more than primal mating, the predator having captured a prey he'd hunted for months. I was weak and breathless, refusing to think about the consequences.

Or about his plans for me in the future.

This was far too enjoyable, my muscles spasming. As I continued finger fucking myself, he shifted his hold, crowding over me then cupping both breasts. The moment he squeezed my nipples, twisting them until I yelped from the exquisite pain, another orgasm crashed into me like a freight train.

“Uh. Uh. Uh. Uh.” My cries were met with his whispered words in Spanish that I couldn't understand but knew they were provocative, a telling of what he planned later.

And God help me, I wanted more. Much more.

While I wanted to believe this was as sick as I'd told him early in our... sensual activity, the enjoyment was far too intense to blurt out anything but my cries of joy.

As he continued pinching my aching buds, the orgasm refused to let go, and the pulsing wave kept cascading through me. I could tell he was close to coming, every sound he made strangled, his entire body tensing as he pressed more of his weight against me. When I squeezed my muscles, the joy of his body convulsing thrilled as well as sickened me.

He erupted deep inside, filling me with his seed, the single word he whispered breaking through the last barrier, sweeping me into another plateau.

“Mine.”

I clenched my eyes closed, still able to see visions of his face, his stunning body. Even though I tried to shove them away, they remained like beacons of unwanted desire. But could I delude myself any longer that this wasn't exactly what I'd

been craving for so long? Of course not. Even though dozens of questions filtered into my mind one at a time, crowding my mental capacity, I didn't want to come down from the incredible ecstasy he'd provided.

Alessandro wrapped his arms around me, pressing his lips against my neck. Then he pulled away, crawling off the bed.

I slumped onto the comforter, trying to control my breathing, unable to focus. Maybe I didn't want to at this point. Then reality would regain control.

Seconds later, I heard his footsteps as he walked out of the room. Tensing, I rolled over, noticing the gun as well as the phone on the dresser. I threw my gaze toward the door, uncertain of what I was thinking. Maybe by instinct or maybe because this would never end well, I crawled off the bed, trying to remain as quiet as possible. I took a deep breath, holding the dense air in my lungs as I approached the dresser.

The phone was useless without his code. Why waste time trying to figure it out? However, the weapon was something else entirely.

I'd never shot a gun in my life, but I'd watched enough movies I thought I should be able to figure it out.

My hand shaking, I managed to grab it, shocked at the weight. The metal was cold against my hand, and I almost dropped it before I managed to wrap my fingers around the handle. That was the moment he returned to the room, a towel in his hand.

He took a deep breath, allowing his gaze to fall ever so slowly. "Is that what you really want to do, Sierra? Do you want to kill me?"

"I don't know."

"You do know. You're just not willing to believe the truth."

"That's bullshit." I lifted my arm, aiming for the center of his chest. "I want my life back. You took it from me."

"Did I?" he breathed, cocking his head and daring to take a step closer. "Or did I provide you with an escape from the

deep cavern you'd fallen into, an abyss of lies that you knew existed but refused to believe?"

"Stop talking. Stop moving or I will shoot."

"Then go ahead. If that's what you really want, do it. I won't stop you."

Did the man have a death wish? I took scattered breaths, hesitating. I was no killer, but everything that had occurred was a nightmare that I needed to wake up from. When he took another step closer, his smirk pissing me off, I stuck my arm out even further. "One more move and I will pull the trigger."

The bastard kept coming. Closer. Closer. His scent was as intoxicating as before, the look in his eyes full of amusement. He didn't believe I had the courage to do it. The son of a bitch.

So I did. I pulled the trigger, instantly closing my eyes.

Nothing happened.

Gasping, I glanced from his face to my hand just as he wrapped his finger over mine, easily pulling the gun away. A wave of panic tore through me, the fear more significant than before.

"You should remember to release the safety, *mi dulce gatita*." He returned the weapon to the dresser then brushed his knuckles down the side of my face. "I knew you would try. That's in your nature. For now. That is the only thing I plan on breaking, your desire to vanish from the one thing in your life that will provide you with the joy you deserve."

Was he kidding me? I winced from his touch, certain he was going to hit me, but he continued stroking the side of my face as he guided me toward the bed, easing me down.

"What are you doing to me?" I whispered as he rolled me over, spreading my legs then rubbing the towel between them.

"Giving you what you need." He concentrated on what he was doing, wiping away remnants of our sex. Then he tossed the towel, still standing over me.

What the hell was he doing, deciding my fate?

“Get dressed, Sierra. Come down to the kitchen. We are going to have a discussion.”

His command was not to be denied. As soon as he started dressing, I sat up, studying him. I was exhausted, drained from the ordeal, and needed answers, yet I couldn't take my eyes off him.

Alessandro was exquisite, more so than any man I'd ever seen. He was carved to perfection, every muscle sculpted out of the finest marble. His cock was long and thick, still throbbing after his release. And his buttocks were the reason God made jeans in the first place.

I forced myself to look away, trying to remain repulsed at my attraction to him, but the feeling was no longer there. Somehow, some way, it had been replaced with constant longing, my mouth watering.

When he was dressed, he shifted the weapon behind his back, refusing to give me another chance at learning from my mistakes. Then he slid his phone into his pocket. At that moment, I felt entirely helpless. I wasn't going anywhere. His gaze was heated, as full of lust as it had been before, but I sensed it was being crowded out by his need for answers as well.

We were both searching for the same thing—the truth.

“How did you get my number?” I asked, trying to maintain my defiance.

He smirked as he placed his watch around his wrist. That's when I noticed the large ring on his finger, the jewels sparkling in the light. “As you might imagine, Sierra, I had a network of people who can provide me with almost any information I seek.”

“How did you know who I was?”

“A good question. The only mistake Tristen made was leaving a will. If he hadn't, I would never have known you existed.”

I thought about what he told me and sighed. It fit the pattern. His family hadn't known me. His few friends who'd been at the funeral had acted as if I was a stranger. Then there were...

I remembered seeing two men in dark suits standing in the back of the church. “Were you there at the funeral?”

He laughed. “No, *gatita*. I was already in prison.” He narrowed his eyes as if curious what I meant. I wasn’t going to supply him with anything quickly or easily. I needed to find out what the hell was going on.

“How did you manage to call me from prison? The number was blocked.”

As he walked toward the door, he gave me another long look. “My family’s attorney has always been helpful.”

“But you said Tristen was your attorney.”

“No, I said he worked for me. Did he use his legal skills with regard to several businesses owned by my family’s organization? Yes. However, he was providing other services as well.” The damn look of ire on his face pissed me off all over again.

“I want answers,” I demanded.

“So do I. Come downstairs. I don’t need to tell you what will happen if you attempt to escape. However, you will find it difficult given I secured the windows. If it’s the truth you seek, Sierra, be prepared for the fact your life will never be the same again.”

“And it is now? My life as I knew it ended the day you made the first call. What I’m left with is a nightmare.”

He studied me for a full minute then sighed. “Beware the monsters lurking in the shadows, Sierra. They are vile, evil creatures.” He turned and walked to the door.

“Are you a monster, Alessandro?”

I could tell he was thinking about his answer. It came in one word.

“Yes.”

CHAPTER 11



*A*lessandro

Monsters.

When I was a kid, I'd believed in boogeymen who lived in the shadows and under the short sweep of closed doors. After I was a teenager, I realized they existed in men who held power, but instead of clawing their victims to death, they used a more satisfying method of ending someone's life.

A gun.

Sometimes a knife.

In my world, the bloodier the better.

I'd never questioned my position or my future, expecting a rise to the throne by the time I was thirty, which I'd achieved. Wealth had surrounded me from the first time I could remember, finances never an argument held between my parents. None of us wanted for anything. That's how I assumed that it was perfectly acceptable to take what I wanted without reservation.

Being around Sierra had me questioning every aspect of my life. She'd gotten me thinking about what made me happy. I'd concluded I was a joyless man, destined to feed off the anger furrowing inside of me for the rest of my life. Maybe that was how it always played itself out. Loneliness in exchange for owning real estate, cars, businesses, yachts, and even women.

A bitter laugh escaped my throat. So, yeah, I was a monster after all.

I could have anything I wanted at my fingertips within hours. But I couldn't have the one thing I longed for desperately.

Love.

It wasn't allowed. Not in my world. Even my parents had endured an arranged marriage, acting as if that was the norm. It had been that way during my grandfather's reign while he was still in Spain and with all my relatives before him.

I hadn't lied to her. In fact, I hadn't allowed myself to give her false hope or promises.

I'd always been a man who appreciated integrity, even though every aspect of business, including the legitimate ones, had become successful based on less than honest methods. There was really no reason to tell her anything, supplying answers to her dozens of questions.

But I wanted to. A part of me wanted to provide Sierra with a reason to trust me.

And for the life of me, I didn't know why.

By all rights, I should shatter her world into a million pieces, demanding she supply every scrap of information locked away inside that big brain of hers.

Yet I didn't want her to suffer.

A laugh formed in my gut as I headed downstairs, returning to the kitchen. I grabbed the bottle of scotch, pouring a hefty amount as I continued to think about her. I wasn't surprised my cock continued to ache, longing to thrust inside of her for a second time tonight. Perhaps I would. I threw back the glass, contemplating what the hell I wanted to do from here. Her doe eyes continued to haunt me, pushing the realm of possibility that she'd been kept in a vacuum at the forefront of my mind.

However, I'd learned a long time ago that women were the best at both hiding their feelings as well as lying their asses off. After my lengthy interrogation, I'd determine my final course of action. Whatever the outcome, keeping her as my

captive provided a series of complications I'd ignored in my mind.

My family for one. They wouldn't understand or approve of my methods of locating Tristen. While I cared to a point, my main concern was that once my enemies got wind of her existence, she would become a weakness that would be used against me. And worse? She could become a casualty.

"Christ," I muttered, swirling the liquid as I shook my head. When the hell had I ever given a damn what my family thought about my actions? Not since I was a kid. Had the woman singlehandedly shoved the concept of a conscience into the hidden parts of my soul? I hissed and tried to shove the idea aside.

Then a vision of her face floated into the forefront of my mind. This was getting ridiculous.

The sound of my phone irritated the hell out of me. I'd left explicit instructions not to bother me for a few days unless there was an emergency. I couldn't fathom what the hell could have occurred in the three days since my departure.

Matteo's number popped up on the screen. Exhaling, I took my time answering. "This had better be good."

"Sorry, boss. We have an issue," Matteo said, his voice gruff.

"And that would be?"

"A full-blown raid."

He'd gotten my attention. "On what?"

"The gambling facility behind the dry cleaners, another one at the body shop. They knew exactly when to hit. One of the police officers on the payroll got nabbed too."

I closed my eyes. My father had insisted on keeping the aging establishments. Yes, they made us significant money, more so than I'd ever imagined, but I'd learned a long time ago it was the mom and pop shops the cops were determined to take down. "How much did they grab?"

"Four million give or take. The fuckers arrested eight of our men in the process."

Matteo wasn't prone to demonstrative actions or overblown reactions to anything, but I sensed he was more concerned than usual. The men in my employ would die rather than sing, but the loss of numbers of both people and cash was only the beginning of my worries. The Feds would likely come after me for violation of my parole. While I'd only had ten months left to serve, if they believed I was behind the operation, I'd be tossed in jail awaiting a fucking new trial.

That wasn't going to happen.

"What aren't you telling me?"

"We have a little bird in our midst."

His words settled like a lead balloon sweltering in my gut. I'd spent the two weeks since my release checking on every aspect of our operations, providing insurance to both my father as well as my mind that we had a solid operation, no weak links. "I want him found. Now."

"Boss, this don't look good for you."

"No," I said under my breath. "But I've handled worse. Let me know if the Feds continue to sniff around." If I had to guess, I'd say the reason the Feds had been sniffing around earlier was because the raid had been planned. Had they been determined to find the right time when they could do the most damage? Why did I have a feeling there was another phase of their planned takedown event?

"Yeah, I will, boss. When are you returning?"

"A couple days."

"Let me know if you need me there."

I laughed. "I'll be fine. Just handle the other matter as we discussed."

"Already in motion."

An incoming call forced another exhale as I pulled my phone away. I should have known Edwardo would call as soon as he heard the news.

"Edwardo."

“I told you to lay low,” he barked.

“And good evening to you as well.”

“Cut the crap, Alessandro. Your father is out of his mind worrying about this shit. It’s the last crap the family needed.”

The family. “Don’t you mean the business operation, Edwardo?”

“Semantics. I don’t think I can keep you out of prison.”

“Well, this wasn’t my operation to handle. How quickly you forget.” This was Cruz’s responsibility, although as head of the syndicate, all eyes and fingers were pointed in my direction. That’s what the fucking Feds had waited for.

“I don’t give a shit.”

“Listen to me. Find out exactly how the police found out. I don’t care how far you need to go into the rabbit hole. Find out. We either have a leak, or someone is fucking with us.”

Edwardo groused under his breath. “I’ll do what I can; however, I’ll be a little busy trying to keep you out of jail.”

“Which I’m certain you can do.” I ended the call before I was forced to ‘handle’ him in an entirely different way. While my father had never interfered with the way I managed the organization, he had warned me on the day of his retirement that I should accept that Edwardo was my greatest ally.

Pops had known how much I despised the man and always had. That didn’t make Edwardo bad for business, just that I knew when it was time to keep my distance. He had a tendency to erase what little patience I had.

“Trouble in paradise?” Sierra’s lilting voice held the same air of repulsion as before, yet the glint in her eyes told an entirely different story. She’d shifted away from fearing me to growing more curious as to why we had such a strong connection. If I knew, I’d tell her. There was no feasible explanation.

“Business. Come and sit.”

She still had a tentative look on her face, but she did as I asked, but not without hesitating for a few seconds as she

stared at the table.

I refilled her glass, shoving it in her direction. She returned the favor, pushing it away instantly.

“Take the drink, Sierra.”

“I need water after you drugged me, not alcohol.”

Sighing, I reached into the refrigerator, pulling out a bottle. She was right. Given the dosage I’d used, she would be partially dehydrated. “Drink both. Humor me.”

“If you insist.”

I waited until she unscrewed the cap, drinking enough to satisfy me. “You’re a tough lady, Sierra, much more so than you give off while hiding behind a counter.”

“I’ve never hidden a day in my life,” she retorted.

“Then what have you been doing in the four years since your fiancé’s accident?”

She opened her mouth to issue another diatribe of hatred then looked away. “Working on growing my business. Any good businessperson will tell you that in the first years, you need to be diligent about your work ethic, ignoring your personal life. But you wouldn’t understand that. Would you? My guess is you’ve never really worked a day in your life, other than pulling the trigger of a gun perhaps.”

The woman didn’t mince words. I admired that more than I cared to tell her.

“We all do what’s necessary in live to ensure our future. Don’t we, Sierra?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

I yanked out one of the other chairs, placing my foot on the rung before leaning over. “It means that I find it curious you act as if you didn’t know what your fiancé was involved in, yet you happily took his money to expand your business. If my intel is correct, you didn’t wait two months after his untimely death before hiring a contractor.”

Her eyes opened wide and in a split second, she tossed the contents of the glass in my face, standing and slamming her palm on the table. “How fucking dare you. You have no idea what it’s like to lose someone you care about. Do you? I doubt it. Even if you did give a shit about someone, my guess is that you would never show it. Hell, I doubt you understand or respect the concept of love. I cared about Tristen. He was everything to me for a year. He was thrilled that I was going after my dream, pushing me to take out a loan. All he did was make certain he could take care of me after he was fucking murdered.”

While I would normally be furious at the level of impetuosity, I wanted her to talk, to share with me everything she could about Tristen.

And about how she felt about him.

Now that I’d spent time with her, their coupling made zero sense to me. Tristen was a man devoid of emotion, enjoying the rat race both inside a courtroom and while hunting down an enemy, exacting penance if necessary. While he was ice, she was fire, a bright burning star in the heavens. Something about their relationship didn’t add up and it had nothing to do with money or influence.

I grabbed a towel, wiping my face as she continued.

“I grieved. Okay? My heart ached. Some days it was almost impossible to walk into my bistro with a smile plastered on my face, pretending like the world was rosy when all I wanted to do was crawl into bed, hoping I could wake up in an alternate universe. There wasn’t a day that went by for a solid year I didn’t question why him. Why did he die in that accident? Why had I been left alone? Why was the world so cruel?” She took a deep breath, her face flushed from the anger, every sound ragged. “Why didn’t I really know him?” Her agitated voice had dissipated, making the last statement difficult to hear.

Sierra noticed she still had the glass in her hand, her knuckles white from the pressure she’d used. She slowly sat down, her body shaking as she lowered her head.

Saying nothing, I reached across the table, gently easing the glass from her hand. The touch was electric, her slight gasp indicating she felt it as well. Then she curled her fingers, pulling her arm against her body protectively.

I refilled her glass and this time she didn't shove it away. A full minute passed, her former expression of defiance turning into resignation without emotion. The transformation was interesting.

It was also genuine.

"I really didn't know him or what he was doing, but I suspected something was very wrong," she said calmly before downing almost half the liquid.

"Be as specific as you can."

The woman wasn't as predictable as I was beginning to think. She sat back, taking her time and swirling her drink before answering me with a question. "You were really in prison?"

"Riker's Island."

She narrowed her eyes, trying to pinpoint whether I was telling a lie. "Because of something Tristen said or did."

"He pointed fingers. Given you are a thorough woman, I'm certain you're going to ask how I'm so positive he's to blame. The answer is simple. My family owns several members of law enforcement in New York and New Jersey, just like we own over a dozen politicians, corporate leaders, and other professionals."

"You own people," she repeated.

"Yes. It's the way of our world."

"Your world sounds not only dangerous but very depressing. I'm not going to say I'm sorry you were in prison. There is such a thing as right and wrong, good versus evil in this world. You had a choice like anyone else and you chose one of chaos and murder instead of humanitarianism and love. You're a self-appointed ruthless man who makes no bones about enjoying your life as it is. I don't have any sympathy for you

and what you might or might not have gone through. Sending you to prison sounds justified.”

Her words enflamed the beast inside of me, but I couldn't blame her for attempting to place a great divide in the different aspects of our life. “Do you still believe Tristen was any better than the bastard standing in front of you?”

Her jaw clenched, her mouth twisting. “I would never have allowed him into my life had I known what he was a part of.”

“What Tristen was a part of was a powerful organization that continues to hold the reins of an entire city. Don't think that he was an innocent player either. He was required to use whatever means necessary in order to perform his job. I don't think you understand the ramifications of becoming involved in what you obviously consider a disgusting world.”

“No, and I don't want to.”

“What do you want?”

She laughed, the sound as bitter as mine had been. “To go back five years ago.”

“What would that accomplish?”

“Maybe I'd ask the questions that had been on my mind since two months into our relationship. Maybe I would have pressed him about why he wouldn't talk about his work or allow me to see his phone. Maybe I wouldn't have been stupid enough to think any man could fall in love with me.”

“I'm also not the kind of man who has a place for sympathy in my life, but if what you tell me is the truth, it was Tristen's loss, not yours. You're a beautiful, vivacious, amazing woman who deserves to have everything you want in life.”

Sierra brushed her hand through her hair before shaking her head. “Your compliments don't mean very much to me at this point. I'm certain when you determine I'm not useful to you, then you're going to kill me.”

“As I already told you, if that was the case, you wouldn't be here with me.”

“Then what do you want, Alessandro? I can’t offer you anything. He didn’t bring work home. He didn’t tell me a damn thing about what he was working on other than he had several international clients, which was the reason for his constant travel. I was never invited to Atlanta, let alone his office. We hadn’t decided on a wedding date, and he certainly hadn’t agreed to move his operations to Raleigh, of all godforsaken places as he told me more than once. I was a fool to believe we had a future together. I kept lying to myself, hoping that every stopover he made at my house we would have a frank, adult conversation, but he died before that could happen.”

It was my turn to laugh. I tossed back my drink, immediately reaching for the bottle. “He’s not dead, Sierra.”

“You said that before. Now, I need to know what in God’s name makes you think that?”

“What was the date he died?”

“Is it after midnight?”

“Yes.”

“Then four years ago yesterday,” she stated flatly.

I waited until I poured another glass, surprised she allowed me to fill hers. “I’d ordered a hit on Tristen the day before he died. He was going to be the prosecution’s star witness in the case against me, which was something I couldn’t allow to happen. Before my soldiers had a chance to handle the order, he suddenly died.”

“You are a bastard.”

“It’s my way of handling business. Kill or be killed. I choose to enjoy life.”

She looked away, taking several shallow breaths. “If you’re trying to convince me that your... soldiers didn’t succeed, don’t fool yourself. I don’t believe it for a second.”

“I assure you, Sierra, that I would have preferred to handle the situation myself, but I couldn’t afford to have a possible murder charge added onto the list of crimes against me.”

“If it’s such a long list, why are you a free man?”

I couldn’t help but grin. “My attorney is good at what he does. As far as Tristen, I’m thoroughly convinced he was placed into witness protection.”

“Why in God’s name would you think that?”

“After his death, the trial continued and I was convicted because of his written testimony provided by the prosecution, which the judge accepted given the... circumstances.”

“If you’d killed him then you wouldn’t have gone to jail.”

I offered a single nod. She was quite formidable, capable of shutting down her emotions when necessary.

“If what you’ve told me about him is the truth, isn’t that par for the course as to how US Marshals handle WITSEC?” she asked. “Why are you just realizing it?”

I was shocked that she knew at least a little about how the program worked.

“Not always. It depends on what kind of information the witness provides.”

“Which is why so many witnesses disappear.” A wry smile crossed her face. “Wait a minute. Your sentence was considered relatively light. That’s why you initially didn’t act on your belief. Tristen not only stole money from you, but he also removed intellectual property from your organization. Didn’t he?”

I lifted my glass in salute. “Excellent assumption, my *gatita*.”

She folded her arms, still staring at me. “But since you’re standing here, you think he’s holding onto whatever he took from you. Maybe he’s trying to sell it to the highest bidder.”

Her smirk was irritating, but also providing another moment of full arousal. “As I’ve said before. You’re very intelligent.”

“That would destroy you and your... organization.”

I almost noticed a faraway look in her eyes. “No, but it would become an uncomfortable situation.”

“And you think it’s possible I can help you locate this information. That is if he’s really living under an assumed identity.”

“While my father and brother chose to believe the forensics report, including providing me with a bloody pictorial of the aftermath of the crash as well as DNA samples, I’m smart enough to know that those things can and have been faked. The US Marshals are very talented.”

“You waited to hunt him down yourself. That’s an incredible, if not ridiculous story. I saw his casket. I was there at his funeral. I was...” She was still fighting the truth.

Before she looked away, I noticed the doubt was fading in her eyes as several pieces in her mind began to fall together.

“The casket was closed, you said so yourself.”

Sierra nodded instead of answering.

“Don’t try and fool yourself any longer. I have no idea why he made the decision to live a normal life with you, lying about who and what he was.”

“If what you say is true, then I need to know why. I deserve to have the truth. He could have picked up some tart off the street to spend time with. Instead, he chose to spend eleven months and thirteen days pretending he gave a damn about me. That doesn’t sit well with the logical side of my brain. I need to know other things as well, truths from you instead of riddles.”

“And they are?”

“Why call me? Why play a game when all you really wanted was to kidnap me, using me to get what you want? Why? Don’t you know or care at all what that did to me?” she snarled as she smashed her palm against her chest over her heart. “It hurt. I don’t know why, but you awakened something I thought dead because Tristen killed it within me. I always told everyone he was so sweet and amazing, bringing me flowers. Do you want to know the sick truth? At first it was wonderful, just like some damn fairytale. He came into my bistro on a warm autumn day. By that night, we were having dinner. We ended up spending the weekend together. Only two

weeks later he asked me to marry him, and I said yes. We had an amazing whirlwind romance. He was incredible, so attentive and loving. We were almost exactly alike. I knew I'd found my Prince Charming. Christ. I was such a fool. There isn't a man on earth who can fill those shoes."

Her hateful glare was only partially directed at the man who'd lied to her.

"I'm sorry that he hurt you."

"Right. You couldn't care less. Don't bother, Alessandro. I don't need to be pacified. Please answer me one question. Did you send flowers, red roses to my store?"

I narrowed my eyes. "While I enjoy indulging beautiful women, roses are not something I enjoy giving. They remind me of death."

The look in her eyes was as interesting as it was haunting. "Fine." She laughed again as she fiddled with the glass. "As the weeks turned into months, Tristen started becoming agitated. At first, he was grumpy. Then irritated at everything I did. Then he'd storm out. Always apologizing. Always sending me a dozen red roses."

My muscles tensed as I realized what kind of man Tristen had been with her. Being rough with a woman was one thing, being abusive another. "What did he do to you?"

She closed her eyes briefly, taking another sip of her drink. "We had a huge argument the night before he died. I accused him of hiding things from me. Things got ugly and he struck me out of anger, storming out a few minutes later. I threw my ring after him and told him I never wanted to see him again."

"The fucking son of a bitch. I'll enjoy ripping out his throat with my bare hands."

She stared at me with hard, cold eyes, never blinking.

"If you're trying to look into my soul—"

"You have no soul," she interrupted. "None. And your heart is pitch black."

“Interesting for a woman who’s only known me a few hours. Also interesting given our conversations.”

“I know your type. You enjoy displaying your power, using violence as your only tool of interrogation as well as intimidation. And our conversations were all lies, beautiful acting by a man with no understanding of love or humanity. I applaud you, Alessandro. You had me fooled for a little while. Shame on me.”

I gave her words consideration. “Perhaps you are right, at least with regard to my penchant for violence. However, utilizing intellectual conversation with basic thugs hasn’t been well received.” When she started to retort, I held up a finger. “Our conversations were real, Sierra. You can’t deny what you felt any more than I can. There is a connection that cannot be denied, a hunger that leaves us both breathless. However, what I can’t do is allow the enjoyment of our passion to interfere with what needs to be done.”

Her eyes shimmered from the words I’d said as well as the admittance I’d made.

I’d meant every word.

She was a woman who’d awakened the beast, dragging him from the depths of darkness, enticing his sadistic hungers. However, the thought of hurting her wasn’t something I would allow to happen. She was a precious creature, a delicate flower.

A woman who defied the odds, holding a warrior’s heart.

She was also a liability—one I couldn’t afford, but didn’t want to be without.

My appetites were extreme, too much for a woman of Sierra’s nature. Even though I sensed she enjoyed the darkness, she couldn’t handle my brand of kink. It would destroy her. Yet I couldn’t get past the raging desire rushing through my system like wildfire.

The need to fuck her.

Shackle her.

Discipline her.

Mark her.

My hunger knew no bounds.

She was right, able to see through my façade. I was a sick man capable of vile things. Yet it drew her like a moth to a flame. Too bad when we were finished, we might be burned to a crisp. Did I care at this point? The answer was a solid no. I continued to remind myself that I took what I wanted, and this vivacious woman would never be free of me.

Her expression was pensive but there was more than a hint of raging desire sizzling her senses, keeping her excited to learn what I had planned.

Filthy, sadistic things.

The thought kept my cock aching and my mouth watering for another taste. Soon...

“Then maybe you need to enter into another business.” She allowed the words to hang, dragging her tongue across her lips. Did she have any idea what she did drove me insane? Did she understand that with the simple touch of her hand or the way she defied me whenever the mood struck her dragged out the beast? “What Tristen did wasn’t right, but I think he was pushed by you, by circumstances,” she continued.

“You grieved for him.” My tone was dark, angry. I wanted the man dead, his head on a platter, partially for what he’d done to her. She hadn’t deserved to be caught in the middle.

What the fuck was I thinking? Was she hiding something from me? If so, I would find out and she would be punished.

Whatever the case, I’d need to keep this feisty woman close until I discovered the truth.

She’d become an unexpected gift, a sweet taste that I could use to my benefit. The thought of breaking down her walls, exposing every vulnerability was far too delicious to ignore. An idea was born, one that my family would consider blasphemous. However, if handled correctly, the ultimate goal

could be achieved. I'd also have an opportunity of indulging in my passions over and over again.

Even if I was playing a dangerous game, leaving a noose looped around my neck.

“Yes, but not for the man he'd become. For the man I'd met. I couldn't make sense of how things had gotten so ugly. At least now I know. At least now I no longer need to feel the ugliness inside of me, festering into sores that have never healed. Guilt. My God. Guilt almost consumed me for four fucking years,” she half laughed, her face twisting from the revelations, anger replacing sadness. “I believed in some crazy unexplainable way that I was the cause of his death, when that isn't the case.”

The tension was thick, more so than necessary. I should have seen the signs myself, the man spiraling as pressure had been placed on him by the Feds.

“For what it's worth, it's entirely possible he staged the argument in order to provide you with protection, so you'd stay away. He was no fool, Sierra. He knew the fucking risks.”

“It's not worth much, Alessandro, but thank you. If it's alright with you, I'd like to go to bed now.”

I eased away from the table, leaning against the counter, thinking about the various options. At this point, her usefulness would be a tool used to draw Tristen out in the open. However, what I knew about Witness Protection, it would take an act of God for him to risk becoming one of the living dead even for a short period of time. He knew how I operated. He'd know I would be poised and ready to slice him into pieces. As I took a swallow of my drink, my cock started to stir as it had before.

Letting her go wasn't an option, not just because she would do the right thing by contacting the police. I couldn't allow that to happen. However, it was much more. As I stared into her eyes, the moment captured was exactly like the one I'd had in prison. I'd been captivated, my cock aching as much as it was at this moment. I'd been attracted to women before, but nothing like the jolt of electricity that had torn through every

muscle and vein, shutting down my usual ability to see when danger was coming.

“The day I saw your picture, I became distracted. That allowed two fucking bastards who’d been hired by a lowly cartel to assassinate me the opportunity to drag me from the open cell door. They were lifers and had nothing to lose by carrying out an order to end the life of the most notorious crime boss in New York. They would have been exalted, treated like kings even inside Rikers. There were bets being taken, including by the guards. It was just a normal day behind the thick cinder block walls.”

She lifted her head, her mouth pursed, but I could tell she was troubled by what she heard.

“I lost a pint of blood and spent two weeks in a sweltering hellhole because of a woman I’d never met, a beautiful creature highlighted in a photograph. Something snapped inside of me on that very day just like it did the moment I met you, a need unlike anything I’ve ever felt before, a desire that burned so brightly I could no longer breathe.”

“I don’t want to hear this.”

“We aren’t finished yet,” I growled.

“What do you freaking want from me?” she asked, glaring at me with another round of hatred in her eyes. “Yes, I need to understand why Tristen lied to me, but I’m not your savior, Alessandro. I can’t force him to appear in the open.”

“Yes, *mi dulce gatita*. You do deserve to know the truth in all things and nothing I’ve told you is a lie. You *will* help me bring Tristen out in the open. You have no choice in the matter.”

As she stood, her body was swaying. “No matter this connection we have, you were right in that I lived a lie for far too long. What makes you think there is anything I could do to help you drag him into the open? Contrary to what you think, he doesn’t give a shit. I’m certain he has a nice life at both your and my expense. At this point, I couldn’t care less.”

I put my drink on the counter, walking closer. “But I do. No one steals or betrays the Montenegro family. What I want from you is simple, my *gatita*. You’re going to become my wife.”

CHAPTER 12



*S*ierra

Wife.

The man had to be joking, but I knew he wasn't. However, if he thought for a minute I would ever considering marrying him, then he was delusional.

And I had no intentions of catering to his twisted needs.

"You're out of your mind," I whispered, curious as to his reaction. As he rounded the table, closing the distance between us, I shivered just like I'd done before.

His expression remained stern, but his eyes told an entirely different story. He was challenging me, providing an opportunity to learn the truth while getting exactly what he wanted. I'd have to be a bigger fool than I'd already been to even consider such a ridiculous option. Even if what he'd just said was true, I wouldn't allow myself to give a damn about another man, especially one as violent and brutal as he was.

"Some would say exactly that, my sweet kitten. While my methods are almost never conventional, they do provide answers as well as complete satisfaction." His voice shimmered across my body, tingling all the wrong places. I should remain disgusted with him, but it was growing increasingly difficult to shy away from the images and hunger that continued to surface.

The man was fully aware of the power he held over me, and he intended on exploiting it to accomplish his goals.

I looked away, staring down at my drink, my throat tightening. A part of me wanted to learn more about Alessandro, to know what made him tick and why he was determined to act on his bloodlust. “What else happened to you in prison or is revenge the only thing that provides that satisfaction in your life?”

When I slowly lifted my head, I noticed the change in his eyes, an icy glaze replacing the explosive heat.

“Do you really want to learn the dangerous side of law enforcement, a place where heinous criminals are tossed, left to fend for themselves under the guise of rehabilitation?”

“Yes.”

He moved closer, crowding my space, leaving the pulse in my neck throbbing. His gaze slowly lowered to the exact pressure point to the left of my throat, and I could tell his mouth was watering to bite into the area, drawing blood. The thought was... sensual.

“On the day I was provided with your picture, a request of my attorney, my single objective was to memorize every detail of your face. I had months before my release, if not over a year, but I was determined to allow your features to burn inside my mind, so I never forgot my goal after I walked out from behind those prison walls.”

I trembled, my breath ragged. Did I really want to learn the ugly truth?

“As I said, the moment I gazed on your lovely face, something clicked inside of me, a small eruption of desire that built to the point I craved learning everything about you. I knew at the moment we would become lovers, bonded together through heartache and pain. Yes, I planned every detail of seducing you, drawing you into a web of passion that you would never be able to ignore.”

He lifted his hand, gently rubbing the tips of his fingers down my cheek, sliding the tip of his index finger across my lips. It was as if he was reenacting the moment he'd gazed on my

photograph. “Those men were animals, attacking from behind, driving carefully crafted sharp shanks into my kidneys, slashing my neck and arms. However, the bastards underestimated me. They had no idea what I was capable of.” He cupped the side of my face, his hold possessive, his fingers digging into my skin.

I found myself pressing my face into his hand, nuzzling against the warmth and controlling hold, my nipples fully aroused and my thighs slick with pussy juice. The monstrous man had become a drug I couldn't walk away from, intoxicating to the point my vision was foggy.

“What about the guards?” I asked, although I had a feeling that I already knew the damning answer. “There had to be decent men or women who tried to stop what was happening.”

His laugh was sultry, sending a trickle of vibrations down my legs. “None of the guards could give a shit. Fights were their form of entertainment. What I learned afterwards was that it was a twenty to one against me. If only I was a gambling man. While I won't horrify you with the gory details, you should know that when I was finished, I was covered in their blood, their broken bodies pitched into the corridor like ragdolls. And no one gave a shit.”

I realized I was holding my breath, struggling to understand how a system could be so flawed. “That's terrible.”

“Yes,” he murmured as he lowered his head, brushing his lips across mine only once. “But I would suffer any form of consequences, every ounce of agony inflicted all over again to recapture that single moment where I finally managed to embrace my destiny.”

“Which is?”

“You.”

He captured my mouth, and I was instantly consumed by the taste of him, the rush of electricity soaring through me. How could this dangerous man have such a powerful presence, able to maintain such a strong hold on both my emotions as well as my physical needs? There was no sense to it, no understanding

of why I ached to succumb to the strong, filthy desires that left me wet and hot, hungry to the point I couldn't focus.

As he pulled me into his arms, sliding his hand down my back, I melted into him, no longer struggling with the intense need. I craved the passion, breaking free of the wretched prison I'd been driven into.

And he was the only man who could save me from the depths of the personal hell I'd placed myself in.

He swept his tongue inside, his fingernails creating marks in my buttocks. The connection between us was undeniable, stronger than it had been before, breathtaking in its power. I rolled my arm over his shoulder, tangling my fingers in his thick hair, undulating my hips back and forth as he drank from my mouth.

Every deep guttural sound he made activated another strike of current, igniting the orange-hued embers pooling in my system. There was a tenderness, a closeness to the man I hadn't expected, the two of sides of him colliding together with increased longing. How could such a violent killer kiss with such intensity?

When he broke the kiss, I almost stumbled forward, the feeling of immediate loss emptying my system. What was he doing to me? More important, why was I allowing it? I turned away, trying to break the spell, pressing my fingers across my lips. I could still taste him, his scent covering every inch of my skin. I suddenly had the urge to wash it off, to cleanse myself of his brutality, as if I could ever break the invisible chains he'd already placed around my neck.

"Can I take a shower?" My question was like a child asking for a glass of milk before bed. It was ridiculous, but necessary. Rules. Even as his wife, I'd be forced to play by his rules. Was I really considering it?

"Yes, my sweet kitten, but first, I need to make myself very clear. There is no choice in the matter. You will become my wife. However, as brutal as you believe me to be, I'm not without some understanding of what you must be going through. You will remain by my side for six months until

Tristen had been brought into the open. At that time, I'll provide you with a million dollars and an annulment so you can enjoy the rest of your life."

I had to take several deep breaths before forcing myself to look into his eyes once again. "Six months of being controlled by you, told what to do?"

"If you're asking if our relationship will be... traditional, the answer is yes. You will surrender to my needs at all times, no matter what is required of you. You will also follow my rules, or you will be punished harshly and often, humiliated if necessary."

The man believed he was a god, a king who could require me to grovel at his feet. "What if I say no?"

He took a deep breath, his eyes twinkling as he crowded my space once again. As he blew a swath of hot hair across my face and neck, the bastard knew how my body would respond. Goosebumps trickled down my arms, my nipples pushing against the thin material of the dress I was forced to wear. "Then, my beautiful little flower, the money will be off the table, and you will remain with me for the rest of your life."

I had no choice. None. He'd made one for me. I was his prisoner whether I liked it or not. "What if your hunt isn't successful?"

God, I hated when the man smirked, as if he knew something I didn't. "Then the rules of our delicious game will change, but the six months will stand."

If I agreed, I'd be entering into a contract with the devil, a rough, sexy beast.

"I need to think about it," I told him, refusing to back down from my defiance.

"Very well. You have until morning."

"Understood." As I backed away, I couldn't seem to stop shivering. Was I really considering his demand, a sick offer that could only end badly?

“Use the shower in the main bedroom at the end of the hall. You’ve earned the right to remain out of your cage for tonight. Keep in mind that if you attempt to escape, I’ll be forced to chain you to the bed.”

There it was—a stark reminder that he was nothing but a bastard I should hate with everything I had inside of me. Maybe I’d needed the demanding shove to kick me out of the sweet reverie of our passion. I was nothing but an end to a means for him, a possession to be used.

Tasted.

Fucked.

Owned.

To hell with him. While he believed I’d underestimated him, he had no idea how strong my resolve was. I would find my answers, a truth that I doubted I wanted, but in the process, I would destroy the man. Somehow. Some way.

So help me God.

As I headed toward the stairs, I realized the real question was why my entire body tingled at the thought of surrendering to a soulless man.

The thought remained heavy in my mind as I walked into the bedroom, staring at the bed that he’d fucked me on, my body instantly quivering given that the memories and images were fresh.

And haunting.

Damn him for making me feel all those dazzling sensations, fueling the fire he’d created with a single phone call. Damn me for wanting him even more.

I moved into the bathroom, my actions perfunctory as I grabbed a towel from the closet, opening the shower door and staring at the faucet for almost thirty seconds before turning it on. Then I turned toward the counter, catching a glimpse of my reflection in the mirror. I’d expected to find haunted eyes, a strained face, and pallid skin. Instead, I was glowing from the aftermath of our sex.

My stomach lurched as I leaned over, hating everything about my body's reaction even more. How could it have felt so right when everything about the man and his mission was wrong?

Or was it?

Had he deserved to go to prison? I wasn't entirely certain how to answer that truthfully any longer. I stripped off the dress, tossing it aside. There was no evidence he'd brought anything else for me to wear. What did it matter? For all I knew, he'd keep me naked the entire time of my... prison term. Other than for glorious pictures I assumed he'd take for the press. That's partially what this was about, his need for revenge including using me to soothe his beast.

I tried to block the horrible thoughts as I stepped inside, determined to wash away my sins, allowing the water to drag every remnant into the bowels of the earth. There was something odd about being in a strange house. It didn't belong to Alessandro. Not really. He would never live in something so... paltry. It was far too cozy, quaint in a homey way, as if a beautiful family had been raised here, enjoying the highs and lows of life.

I imagined he lived in a stark white and black condo somewhere in Manhattan, several employees at his beck and call to service his every need. I laughed as I rolled my fingers over the pinkish colored tile, the edges adorned with roses. Why were we here? Why hadn't he whisked me away immediately, locking me in a steel cage instead of one made of wood? Too many questions rolled through my mind and I hated every one of them.

Almost immediately I felt cold air behind me and turned abruptly, throwing out my hands. As I connected with his naked body, my palms pushing against his chest, he seemed amused.

"I never said I would allow you to shower alone."

He was making good on his requirements without giving me the benefit of determining my answer. I caught a glimpse of his weapon placed on the counter before he closed the door

behind him. He slanted his eyes, immediately pushing me against the tile wall.

“Are you still thinking about shooting me, Sierra? Is that what you ultimately long to do? I’ll give you one piece of advice. When you pull that trigger, make certain you kill me, because if you don’t, you will regret your decision.”

Of that I had no doubt.

I continued shivering even as I lifted my head in defiance, my mind refusing to accept his authority. The game was stressful, but I couldn’t seem to erase the words he’d said during the lonely nights, or the feelings I’d been left with after he’d ended the calls.

Unbridled desire.

Insatiable needs.

Intense suffocation.

But from the life I’d chosen to lead, the fears of the unknown. Yet the longer we’d talked, he’d managed to abate my apprehension, replacing the tension with continuous shudders.

A part of me wanted nothing more than to shove him away, but with him standing so close, the electricity burning so brightly, I couldn’t think of anything else but fulfilling our combined desires.

“I don’t want you,” I said in a whispered voice.

“Why lie to yourself, *mi dulce gatita*? You crave the exact same thing I do. You and I are much more alike than you realize.” Alessandro lowered his head, drinking in my scent, dragging his tongue across his lips.

“We’re nothing alike.”

As he rolled his fingers down the length of my arm, his nostrils flared. “You’re so certain of that?”

“Stop calling me a sweet kitten unless you want to hear me roar.” I slammed my palms against him, but there was no way to budge his larger-than-life body. He evoked desires in me I’d never known existed.

His chuckle resonated in the dense space, pushing my heartrate even higher.

“Please, let me hear it. *Eres hermosa cuando estas enojada.*”

“Stop speaking in Spanish, even though it’s sexy as hell.” My admission garnered a husky growl deep from within him, his actions entirely predatory. I closed my eyes, the sensual sound floating over my shoulders, sliding into the drain along with the rest of my sanity.

“I said you are very beautiful when you’re angry,” he breathed, sliding his lips over my throat to my ear, nipping my earlobe before pressing the tip of his tongue into the shell.

Exhaling, I closed my eyes, no longer able to say I was innocent of dark, dangerous hunger threatening to overwhelm me.

I wanted this man. There was little I could do about it, my body’s reaction taking control. He was far too sexy.

Dangerous.

Tempting.

Dominating.

And I felt myself falling into the quicksand with no way out. When he brushed his lips across mine, I thought I’d recoil by instinct. Instead, I softened my touch against his chest, caressing his skin, running my fingers over his sculpted abdomen.

“I don’t want this,” I added, trying to ignore the way his throbbing cock was pushed into my stomach.

But I did.

“You can’t get enough, my beautiful creature. Can you? Just like my mind is filled with all the nasty things I long to do to your body.”

“You’re a horrible man,” I said boldly, although there was no conviction in my voice, just a hint of languishing desire.

My body shifted involuntarily, leaning into him as my back arched. The moment I parted my lips, he slipped his tongue

inside, taking his time exploring the dark recesses while I allowed myself to touch every inch of his chest. The act was intimate, tender, which was another surprise. I'd never expected a man of his nature to desire to be anything but rough, taking a woman then tossing her aside after fulfilling his satisfaction.

I'd also never imagined a man could touch my soul with his words while not having one himself. The dichotomy made being with him that much more exciting.

"Yes, I am, but that attracts you even more. You want me," he added as he pulled away a few inches, his chest rising and falling.

"Never."

"I love it when you lie to me."

There was a tenderness, a closeness in the moment of passion I hadn't expected, but I sensed the beast had already been lured from his lair. He licked across the seam of my mouth before fisting my hair at the scalp, tugging my head until the length of my neck was exposed.

As he whispered other words in Spanish, I was pulled into a sweet lull, allowing the fingers of one hand to slide down his chest, curling my fingers around his cockhead.

He raked his teeth down the side of my neck with another low, sultry growl. "Are you trying to tease me, my kitten?"

"Why would I do that?"

"Because you crave the danger, but if you are, you should be wary of the outcome."

I stared into his eyes, realizing mine were unfocused, but the shimmer in his was a powerful draw, guiding me into another taste of his world. I remained lightheaded, slightly dizzy as I pumped his shaft, squeezing until he moaned from the friction I created.

"A very bad girl. I'm going to need to fuck that out of you, although I'm not certain that will happen."

How had this man enticed me to the point I could barely breathe? As the steam rose between us, he captured my mouth once again, plunging his tongue deep inside. However, the moment of breathless passion was short lived as his needs increased.

He pulled away, biting down on my chin before shifting his head to my neck, wrapping his lips around my pulse of life. Was this a reminder that he had my entire world in the palm of his hand, my safety and livelihood, my future as unexpected as this moment?

When he lifted his head, he rolled his fingers down my chest, flicking his index finger back and forth across my nipple. “What do you crave, Sierra? Tell me your darkest desire, the yearning that had kept you awake at night.”

I trembled in his hold, unable to put the dark fantasies into the right words. Why should I trust him? Why should I dare allow him to know anything about me when for all I knew, he would use it against me?

As if reading my mind, he spoke words that seemed so genuine, I was taken aback. “I won’t hurt you, *gatita*, not like this.”

When he continued his path of exploration, sliding his hand between my legs, I stiffened, but only for a few seconds. The feel of his finger touching me, tempting me added to the explosive heat. This man was everything I’d wanted my entire life. While it was crazy to believe, I couldn’t stand the tension or the building desire any longer. I needed him as much as he needed me.

And so, I allowed myself to freefall into the unknown.

“Everything.”

* * *

Alessandro

“Everything?” I repeated, the single word enticing me more than it should. But it was her way of acquiescing, if only for the moment. I sensed she was losing control, no longer able to fight what we shared, the hunger that burned so brightly.

When she looked at me again, her eyes were glassy, luminescent.

From the same desire nearly consuming me.

From a need that only I could fulfill.

And from her uncertainty that I wouldn't crush her spirit, or her beautiful soul.

What I felt for her, the intense hunger that I'd experienced the moment I'd gazed at her photograph, was unexplainable. We were far too much alike, although she'd never admit it.

“Touch me again, my kitten. I need to feel your hand wrapped around me.”

Her lower lip quivered as she obeyed me, the flash in her eyes a powerful draw. She was no longer trying to pull herself away.

I dropped my head, her hand only able to reach my cockhead, but I had to taste her sweet nipples, to feel the hardened buds inside my mouth. When I engulfed one, sucking on the tip, she shuddered in my touch.

“Oh,” she murmured, squeezing with additional pressure, her body undulating back and forth.

Sierra's whimpers only added gasoline to the fire, every cell electrified. No woman had ever created such an extreme need in me, pushing me to the point I was losing all control. I moved from one nipple to the other, swirling my tongue around her hardened bud before biting down. When I shifted one hand down her side, sliding it between her legs, her moans filtered into the space. Every sound she made, every ragged breath, created a wave of energy.

“Does that feel good, my kitten?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Do you want more?”

Her slight smile was all I needed.

I fingered her clit, rolling my finger back and forth, realizing that her tiny bud remained swollen from our previous round of rough sex. My excitement heightened as I eased my fingers down, slipping them into her tight channel. The way her muscles clamped around the invasion forced another series of growls. I was nothing but a barbarian, preparing to consume every inch of her.

She parted her legs even further, allowing me additional access. I shoved several fingers inside of her, pumping brutally, flexing them open as her muscles yielded. She was so hot, her juice slickening my fingers.

I knew I wouldn't be able to wait for long before shoving my cock inside. I thrust hard and fast, the force shoving her against the cheap tile wall. She lolled her head to the side, her lips pursed as she tried to continue pumping my cock. My sweet kitten was losing the battle to her own savage pleasure.

Hearing her scattered breathing, I licked and sucked on one nipple then the other, biting down as I rolled my thumb back and forth across her clit.

“Oh, God. Oh...” Her body stiffened, her hand falling away from my cock.

A part of me wanted to admonish her, reminding her that she was required to please, but seeing her shimmering face was like nothing I'd ever witnessed before.

Or wanted so damn much.

Just to please her was an entirely new experience, pushing my boundaries more than I knew was possible.

Sierra tossed her head from side to side, her eyelids fluttering as I switched the angle, driving deep inside. She slammed her hands on my forearms, digging her nails into my skin, gasping for air as a climax rushed into her. She was entirely too beautiful when she orgasmed, the shimmer on her face like the perfect prism of sunlight cascading through broken glass.

I refused to stop, thrusting all four fingers deep inside. As she bucked against me, riding my hand, I thought I'd lose my shit. My cock was at full attention, aching like a son of a bitch. No woman had ever done this to me.

Panting, I refused to stop until a single orgasm rushed into a second, this one even more powerful. A scream erupted from her throat, filling the space with her lovely lilt. I took a deep breath, expanding my lungs with the scent of her pussy juice, my mouth watering for more.

“Look at me, Sierra. Don't take your eyes off me.”

She slowly opened her eyes, her shoulders rising and falling as she stared at me. There was still so much uncertainty and as I slipped my slickened fingers inside my mouth, she shuddered visibly.

I purposely make exaggerated sucking sounds, enjoying the way her eyes flickered, her expression shifting from additional desire to a hint of her usual rebellion. She wanted to hate me with everything she had.

“Open your mouth.”

Instead, she pursed her lips tightly closed, adding another layer to her defiance. When I gripped her throat, she didn't cry out in fear and certainly not in pain, the sound more like a soft purr.

Just like my kitten should make.

She hungered for control, making her own rules, so when she darted her tongue, sliding it up and down the length of a single finger, I shook my head. “Suck them, baby. You need to get used to having thick things inside your hot little mouth.”

Exhaling, she finally opened her mouth wide, closing her eyes before accepting the invasion. I watched in amazement as she turned a simple gesture into one of the hottest fucking moments I'd ever experienced. She wrapped her hand around my wrist, tilting her head from side to side as she took her time licking each finger thoroughly.

My muscles tensed, my balls tight as drums.

“On your knees,” I huffed, no longer recognizing my voice. When she didn’t respond right away, I pushed her down by her shoulders, issuing another harsh growl. “Now, suck me.”

As she was going down, she raked her nails down my chest, throwing me a heated look. When she pulled my cockhead to her lips, brushing the tip back and forth, I threw my head back almost instantly, the sensations that incredible.

“Fuck!”

Seconds later, she pulled the tip into her mouth, using her strong jaw muscles to suck.

I slammed my hand on the shower door, the glass rattling. Then I grabbed a fistful of her hair, firmly intertwining my fingers in her long strands, keeping her in place. As I swore under my breath, alternating between English and Spanish, I realized there’d never been a single woman in my life who’d pleased me this way.

She rolled her lips around the tip, sliding her tongue back and forth before shifting it to my balls. When she sucked on one then the other, I knew I’d lose control far too soon. I rolled onto the balls of my feet, taking several shallow breaths.

She would soon learn what it was like to please her master. The thought alone was enough to keep me hard as a rock for hours. I couldn’t wait to chain her to my bed, indulging in my pleasures any time I felt like it.

I closed my eyes briefly as she toyed with me, running my testicles through her fingers. They were so damn swollen, aching with the need to fill her with my seed.

“Your mouth is hot, so fucking wet,” I growled, my voice almost unrecognizable.

She purred, which allowed me to smile as she used enough pressure I was almost blinded. The second she dragged her tongue along the side of my cock, finally engulfing the tip, I shoved her head down by a few inches.

“Suck me. Just suck me.”

She moaned, her body trembling as she tried to relax her throat muscles. I was in a damn fog from the heat of her mouth, barely able to keep my shit together. As soon as I felt the tip hit the back of her throat, I took full control, pumping her head up and down viciously.

Every strangled sound she made fueled me even more, driving the beast close to the surface. I wanted to consume this woman, to feast on her for hours at a time. She shifted her hand between my legs, taking out her frustration by squeezing my balls to the point of pain.

“If you keep teasing me, there will be hell to pay.”

The flit of her eyes was her answer. She didn't care what I did to her. Fuck, the woman was a firecracker, a distraction I didn't need, but would never be able to let go.

But I'd had enough. If I didn't stop now, I'd explode inside her tight throat. While that would happen, not tonight. Tonight was all about filling her with my seed.

I wanted her covered in my scent, her skin painted with my cum. Hell, I wanted every hole filled so everyone would know she belonged to me.

The woman was testing me, pushing every boundary. I could sense it in every movement, in the way she looked at me. While I enjoyed our game, I'd gone from stalker to aggressor.

Now I was her lover, her master, and the man who would control and rock her entire world.

Tense as hell, I ravaged her mouth, slamming my cock deep inside, straining to hold back. I was pushing my luck, but the feel of her hot mouth wrapped around my cock was far too delicious to pass up. I had no idea how long I lasted, but as sweat rolled down both sides of my face, skimming the entire length of my back, I reached down to the faucet, turning the hot water to cold.

While she squealed from the sudden change, the heat exploding between us, the steam that had had built to a dense fog was enough to keep the space combustible.

I pulled out, gasping for air as I struggled to control my breathing. Then I jerked her onto her feet, shoving her back against the tile.

“What?” she moaned, staring at me with dilated eyes, her mouth twisting in frustration.

“I’m fucking you, shoving my cock deep inside.”

She shook her head as if she didn’t want what I was ready to provide. “I can’t.”

“Oh, yeah, you can, and you will. You’re going to take all of me.” My words were almost garbled, my breathing so ragged all I could hear was the hard thudding of my heart. “That’s what you long for, what you’ve wanted since the first night you heard my voice.”

She looked away but only briefly. Then she lifted her head, pressing her hand against my chest. There was such a tremendous struggle inside her beautiful body and mind, unable to understand yet with every passing second, she wanted more.

“Yes.”

I was surprised she stated the word so boldly, but after that, there was no holding back. I eased my hands under her bottom, lifting her several inches off the tile. Then I shoved the entire length of my cock inside, my body shaking from the rush of adrenaline, every muscle seared from the intensity of the heat we shared.

“Oh. Oh. Oh.” She raked her nails over my shoulder, gripping the other as she wrapped her legs around my thighs.

The feel of her muscles clenching around my cock, clamping down like a vise was better than before, the draw toward her an incredible roll of raw emotions. I wanted nothing more than to keep fucking her for hours. Perhaps I would, but only for tonight. Tomorrow would be an interesting if not long day.

Everything had changed and whether she liked it or not, our marriage would form a force that Tristen wouldn’t be able to ignore. I was certain of it.

There was so much fire between us that I barely felt the frigid water as it splashed over us. We were a raging forest fire together, our primal sounds filling the space, masking the rapid beating of my heart.

I fucked her relentlessly as she slammed her feet against the shower door, one then the other, trying to gain leverage. As I stared into her glassy eyes, I continued chastising myself for playing such a vicious game.

If I was any other man, I'd let her go, but I was evil, devoid of any conscience. She smiled, as if she knew what I was thinking, agreeing with my assessment. Then she squeezed her muscles purposely, accepting the hard fucking, the way her body was pushed to the extreme.

She coiled her feet together, digging her nails into my skin as she held on. Then she slapped one hand over her head, her back arching as her mouth twisted. When another orgasm exploded from deep inside, her scream was strangled, but to me it was the sweetest music in the world.

I kept up the brutal fucking, pushing one orgasm into another, savoring every moment of being deep inside her.

“Yes. Yes. Yes... I just...” She laughed softly, unable to finish her sentence, blinking several times as if attempting to focus. As she slumped against the wall, beads of perspiration trickled over her nose to her lips. She licked them away furiously, finally able to lock eyes with mine.

Sierra pressed her hand against my chest as I eased her down, allowing her feet to touch the shower floor.

“You're so beautiful when you come.”

“That was...” She laughed nervously, kneading my muscles with her fingers as a flush of embarrassment jetted through her.

“We're not finished yet, my kitten.” I flipped her around to face the shower wall, kicking her legs open wide. Then I gripped her hips, pulling her away from the wall before returning my cock into her slickened folds.

As I fucked her like a crazed man, the force I used shaking her entire body, I wanted her to remember this moment, the exact day and time she lost control of her emotions.

“You belong to me.”

As the orgasm threatened to consume me, she dropped her head, her shoulders heaving. In the few seconds she allowed herself to whimper, the sound was entirely different than before.

Gone was the crazed desire, the same kind of hunger that I'd experienced.

In its place was the agonizing sound of a woman who no longer knew the girl inside, the one who'd just lost her battle with surrender.

And as I filled her with my seed, something happened that I'd never experienced before in my life.

A single moment of regret.

CHAPTER 13



*S*ierra

Anger.

I'd obviously been in a mind-altering fog from the drugs, fear and uncertainty about what Alessandro had told me. Then I'd been embroiled in the kind of passion that only happens in fantasies and romance novels. Now I felt nothing but emptiness and anger.

The funny, very sad thing was that I wasn't that furious with the rugged man who'd stripped me away from my life. This was Tristen's fault. At least that was my current line of thinking. At this point, I knew better than to believe in anything.

I closed my eyes, hoping to rub the ache away, but there was no chance. I'd awakened half expecting to be shackled to the bed. Instead, I awoke to the sunlight streaming in and very much alone.

And I longed for Alessandro's touch.

Sighing, I lifted my head, studying him as he paced the deck outside the back door. He'd been on the phone for an hour, but he'd checked on me twice, ensuring I hadn't tried to escape. He'd been right. There were dense woods all around the cabin. I had no idea where we were, although I was firmly convinced that he hadn't left North Carolina.

I'd never felt so alone in my life. I had no clothes, no phone, and no way of contacting anyone. He was my captor, a brutal man who'd managed to do the unthinkable, evoking a nightmare, or at least that's the way I should be feeling. No, he'd created a strange fantasy where darkness and surrender became easy. I was exhilarated, still tingling all over from the three rounds of intense sex. I laughed as I pulled the bottle of water to my lips. What had the man managed to do to me?

I'd enjoyed every second of being fucked by the brutal man. I'd craved it. His touch, his kiss, the way he'd come close to manhandling my body. My body ached, but I felt glorious. That was ridiculous. Nuts. I'd lost it. Every ability to reason or think clearly had vanished.

I closed my eyes, laughing almost hysterically. Then I felt his presence only seconds later.

"Is there something amusing, *gatita*?"

Damn it. I hated when he called me that. I wanted to roar in his face or rub against his leg. I wasn't entirely certain which one and it bothered the hell out of me. "Life. How about that?"

"I find nothing amusing about living."

"No, you wouldn't. You only see the worst in people." I didn't want to turn around for fear I'd fall into the trap again.

"I see what's necessary, Sierra. Some of us aren't born into a world where rose-colored glasses can be worn."

His comment made me laugh again. "I feel sorry for you. You can never share joy. I bet you haven't been to a movie theater your entire life. How about an amusement park? I'm certain your first Christmas gift as a child was a handgun, your daddy proud that you could shoot a can from two hundred yards away. I'm curious when you graduated to human beings. Do you remember your first kill?" When five seconds rolled by, then ten and he maintained silence, I finally turned around. There was such an arrogant expression on his face that I shook my head. "That was cruel and heartless, and I'm not that kind of person, so I'm sorry."

“You have nothing to be sorry about. You’re right, although I was ten when my father taught me how to shoot, complaining that I couldn’t hit a cow if it was standing two feet in front of me.”

I chortled and coughed, realizing he was serious. “That isn’t life, Alessandro. I wish I could show you what it really is.”

“Do you?”

There was no hesitation in my answer. Another surprise. “Yes.”

“Maybe you can one day.” He looked away then leaned against the doorway. “Have you made your decision?”

I raked both hands through my hair. “There is no decision to make, not really. If I say no, you’ll put me in chains, dumping me into the trunk of your car. Then I’ll be locked in a room inside your fancy condo. If I say yes, then I’ll earn the guilt I’ve felt for four years, accepting blood money for something I’m not certain of.”

“But it’s a choice that allows you more freedom.”

“Only after I’m freed from the chains you’ve already wrapped around me emotionally.”

He seemed surprised at my admittance.

Another moment of awkward silence settled in.

“Are you hungry?” he finally asked.

“Why and how do you believe I could eat anything? Why bother asking me?”

“Because I’m not a horrible man, Sierra.”

No, you’re not. I’d caught a brief glimpse of another man inside, one that was tender and caring, someone I could almost like. That scared me even more. “I’m not hungry right now. Maybe later.”

“While we’re on the road. We need to leave soon.”

“This is insane. You can’t do this,” I insisted.

“It’s already done. We have chemistry, Sierra, so this doesn’t have to be difficult, but the choice as I’ve told you before is up to you.”

“Difficult? Do you even understand the concept? You’ve likely never had a difficult day in your life. You stalked me, seduced me then kidnapped me for your vile game of revenge. You’re going to parade me around as your loving fiancée for the world to see in hopes that the man I thought I knew and cared about will slither from his hole so you can kill him, spreading his blood on the streets of New York. If I know you at all, I’d say that would enable you to send a nice warning to all your enemies not to *fuck* with you in the future. Am I close to being right?”

His expression shifted from amusement to irritation. But I wasn’t finished yet. He’d taken the upper hand the day before; it was time to lay down my own set of rules if I was to follow this charade any longer.

“You have no understanding of responsibilities or friendship. While I imagine you live in a gilded condo worth millions, your morning routine including attempting to figure out which expensive Italian sports car you’re planning on driving for the day or perhaps given you have business to attend to, you decide it would be better to call one of your... men to serve as your butler for the day or well into the night. Then you’ll polish up your weapons, sliding not just one but at least two into your pockets to ensure you won’t be killed while you partake in your morning Starbucks. Perhaps at the end of the day you’ll order another suit from Italy while you indulge in a glass of the finest cognac, smoking a Cuban cigar while also determining the torturous method you plan on using the next day to kill your latest enemy. Am I coming close to how you’ll spend your life?”

I was shocked that he continued to remain quiet, studying me as if I was a tiny insect he was ready to squash under his foot.

Something inside of me allowed the boldness of my words, even though I had a strong feeling that I’d regret my actions soon enough. “You see, some of us need to work for a living, refusing to accept blood money in exchange for being a part of

ending someone's life. Some of us enjoy a cabin just like this one, with cutesy furniture and pictures of our family and a beloved furry creature on the walls. And we enjoy the simple things like an ice cream cone on a hot day or a scary movie with a huge tin of popcorn. I know that likely repulses you, but that's the kind of woman I am. Take it or leave it." Could I fall in love with him if he offered those types of things, or was he right that the thought of danger added to my excitement, creating a heightened level of passion?

What I wanted was a little of both.

He took a deep breath, expelling it over a long ten seconds. "I like you, Sierra, just the way you are. This isn't about changing you, at least not in the way you're thinking. However, there are protocols that need to be followed. I won't lie to you about that."

"Just. Like. Rules."

"Yes," he said as he nodded. "But if you obey them, you'll enjoy many freedoms of your own."

"Is that before or after I watch you put a bullet in Tristen's head?"

"Do you know what I craved when I was sitting in a six-by-six-foot concrete cell day after excruciating day?"

I wanted to say I didn't care, but that was a lie. "What?"

"It wasn't a cigar or a fine cognac. It wasn't a blood-rare steak, although I admit that it was the first thing that I ate the night after my release. I craved silence. Pure silence. Not the clanging of bars or the screeching of guards as they commanded we follow their bullshit orders. There was nothing like hearing the wretched screams of another prisoner who was being beaten to a pulp because he looked at some other asshole the wrong way. Just silence."

"Nothing else?"

His smile was strange, as if he was holding a secret. "The touch of another human and not in anger. What we shared last night was special and whether you believe me or not, that was exactly what I'd been craving for over one thousand days and

nights. You were my salvation during my incarceration, the only bright light in a sea of piss and shit, blood and gore. Maybe I did deserve to be in that hellhole, but not because of betrayal and lies.”

Everything about his vehement voice troubled me, although his conviction was genuine. And I wanted so much to believe that there was goodness left inside of him.

A lump formed in my throat, the bile difficult to swallow. Maybe he was slightly human after all.

“Where are we?” I asked, struggling with how to handle this.

He sighed, looking away briefly. “An hour and half away from Raleigh.”

I nodded several times. I had to make a decision regarding the deal, and even though the terms were laughable, why not gain from this... insanity? “I’ll accept your deal on one condition. I need to return to Raleigh for a couple hours. I can’t leave my business unattended. While my full-time employee can handle the store, she needs to be told I’ll be out of town for a few days.” I waited to see if he’d correct me, knowing that he expected me to be by his side for much longer. “Plus, I need clothes. I can’t pretend to be your fiancée in a ripped dress and no panties. Although somehow, I doubt you’d like my wardrobe.”

Alessandro finally chuckled as he walked closer, his heavy boots following the rhythm of my heart. “I’ll buy you anything you’d like in this world, my lovely bride to be.” When he touched my chin, I expected to jerk away, but something had changed between the two of us the night before. I savored his touch as well as the tingling sensations coursing through me.

“I have two questions that I need truthful answers to.”

He took his time sliding my hair from my face, toying with my locks as his chest rose and fell. It was obvious he wasn’t used to being challenged by anyone, especially a woman. “I’ll do my best.”

His best. That wouldn’t be good enough, but I think I’d know if he was telling me the truth. “Were the intimate

conversations we shared real, something you felt deep inside or just a game?”

When he took a deep breath, I was prepared for his usual pontificating bullshit. What I received was something that touched my very soul. “As I said, Sierra, you became my salvation, allowing me a few moments of the joy you seem to think I’ve never experienced. When you answered the phone, it was as if my entire world had changed for the better. Perhaps you’ve already saved me, and you just don’t know it yet.”

I looked away, the ache in my heart as troubling as what he’d put me through. “Can I trust you?”

“That is something only you can answer. The only promise I can make is that I will never lie to you.”

Nodding, I backed away, fighting the raw, oppressive emotions threatening to consume me.

But suddenly, the darkness was no longer oppressive.

* * *

“You’re doing what?” Brittany asked, her expression one of disbelief.

“I’m going out of town for a little while. I need you to mind the store. Can you do that?”

“I... I don’t know.” She furrowed her brow as she continued staring at me.

“Oh, you can. You’ve practically run the place for me. You’ve handled the books, the orders and certainly know how to treat the customers. Besides, if you need to close early you can. And I suggest you make our part-time employees full time in the interim.”

“How long are you going to be gone?”

I didn’t have a solid answer because I feared it would be for the entire six months. “I’m not certain. I’ll let you know and if I need to make other decisions, I will.”

“You like this guy.” Brittany lifted a single eyebrow as she glanced out the window, twisting her face until the sun created a shimmer across her nose ring. I could see her wheels turning, mentally undressing him.

A strange pang settled in my stomach. Was I jealous? That was ridiculous. He wasn't mine and I refused to belong to him.

I managed to laugh easily because the truth was that I did. I was still fighting the feelings I had for him, but at this point, there were no other choices. He'd remained outside, allowing me to spend time alone. He'd placed his trust in me, or so he'd said. I was aware that with a single phone call to the police, I could potentially change the outcome, but I didn't want to. It was crazy, but the truth was something I desperately needed. “He leaves me... breathless.” As soon as I said the four little words, I shuddered because it was the truth.

“Hmm... Well, it is about time you indulged in some hot sex,” she teased. “It does a body good.”

“Brittany!”

She laughed. “Go have a good time, boss. I can call you, right?”

I thought about my cellphone that was still at the house. “Believe it or not, I dropped it last night and need to get a new one. However, I'll call you in a couple days. I'm not certain where he's taking me.”

“What's his name? I at least deserve that.”

“Alessandro,” I breathed. Even half whispering his name made my stomach flutter. Jesus. What the hell was wrong with me?

“Does he have a brother?” she asked as she peered out the window. “I could use a hot man in my life right now. And in my bed. And my shower.”

I laughed as I glanced around the bistro, sad from the thought of leaving. I'd worked so damn hard but couldn't ignore the fact I'd used the money Tristen had either stolen from Alessandro or made because of criminal activities to renovate it. At that moment I felt like burning the building down to the ground. “I honestly don't know.”

I'd been given a strict timetable and I knew it was coming close to being finished. I needed to call Clarice and tell her the same story, or she'd hunt me down. As I turned to go into my office, I was surprised to see her walking in the door with a look of concern on her face.

"Jesus Christ. I thought something happened to you. First, you don't answer your damn phone then Brittany tells me you didn't come in this morning. You had me worried." When she glanced out the window, she shook her head, her grin infectious. "Oooohhh! Silly me. I can see why I shouldn't have bothered."

"I'm sorry. He came back just before closing. We hit it off. Isn't that what you wanted to happen?" I hated lying to her, but there was no other way.

"Yes, but you could have called."

"He took me to a remote cabin and we... well, let's just say we were very busy."

"He gives off dangerous vibes, not like a biker, but more like an assassin. No, a mafia kingpin. That's it. I bet he has a Glock in the small of his back." She smiled when she noticed my frown. "I didn't say he wasn't deliciously appetizing."

"Uh-huh. He's charming and yes, he's sexy as hell." That wasn't a lie. The man had a way of disarming me, even though he exuded absolute power.

Clarice exhaled as she turned around to glance in Alessandro's direction. There was something off about her, and it only had but so much to do with the fact I rarely acted on feelings. "You'll need to give specifics."

"I wish I could but... Alessandro is taking me on a surprise excursion."

"What? Now? You just met him."

"Girl, you have no idea how amazing he is."

"In bed or out?"

"Both." I allowed myself to laugh with her, then a thought entered my mind. The woman was like a bulldog, tenacious as

hell. If I wanted answers, I couldn't put all my eggs in one basket. "I need you to do me a favor while I'm gone."

"O-kay." Clarice narrowed her eyes.

"What's wrong? I can tell you're really bothered by this."

She stiffened, closing her eyes briefly. "I know this sounds nuts, but I could have sworn I saw Tristen on my way to work. That's one reason I had to find out if you were okay."

"What did you just say?" An icy shiver slammed against my spine, frozen fingers clawing at my muscles.

"I know. Don't say it. But I could have sworn I recognized him."

"You met him once, remember?"

"Yeah, but he has... had that kind of face you can't easily forget." She swallowed visibly then plastered a smile on her face. "Just my imagination. I'm happy for you. Just be careful."

She had no idea how truthful her warning was. I could lose everything to the stunning man standing only a few feet away.

Including your heart.

I shoved the unwanted thought aside, trying to keep my cool. "He's dead."

"I get it."

"But everyone has a doppelganger." I laughed, the sound hollow. A crazy thought had come to me only hours before. Now there was no doubt in my mind what Alessandro believed about my ex could be an ugly reality. Was it possible Tristen had tried to warn me?

"You're right," she said, trying to sound more cheerful. "What's the favor?"

I threw a glance out the window before guiding her into my office. "Listen. *This* is going to sound nuts, but you need to trust me."

"Okay, now you're scaring me. I didn't mean to upset you."

“You didn’t upset me and there’s no need to worry, but can you go to my house and get something and keep it for a little while?”

“Why can’t you?”

“Alessandro is in a hurry.”

“Oh, la la. What do you need?”

“You always chastised me for keeping Tristen’s things. You were right.”

Huffing, she rolled her eyes. “Yeah, what few of them were left.”

“I think he was lying to me.”

“Whoa. Where is this coming from? Is this because of what I think I saw?”

“No. It’s just something I’ve been thinking about. There’s a box in my closet. Grab it for me and take it to your house.”

“I don’t understand.”

Oh, God. What was I doing? “Just trust me. There’s a book inside. I want you to look through it to see if there’s any weird passages marked. The rest you can toss.”

“Okay. What the fuck is going on?”

“I can’t tell you right now. Just please trust me and do this one thing for me.”

“Does this have anything to do with this Alessandro?”

“Not a damn thing, but I need to see if I’m crazy or not. You’ll be able to tell me.”

Clarice took a deep breath, wrinkling her nose as she always did when she didn’t like the sound of something. Maybe I was nuts, but why had he left a book? The other stuff he wouldn’t have thought about. Tristen had purposely left it on top of the nightstand before he’d left. I hadn’t thought anything about what I considered strange behavior until the recent drive from the cabin near the mountains.

“Okay. But you will fill me in. Right?”

“As soon as I get back.”

“I hope you know what you’re doing,” she offered, the concern on her face increasing.

So did I. “Relax, girl. I’m finally having fun for once. And I’m taking your advice and pushing aside my past.” I plastered on the sweetest plastic smile I had, fearful that she’d ask too many questions.

“Then I’m thrilled and of course I’ll do it. Maybe not until tomorrow. I have a busy day ahead.”

“Then what are you doing here? Go.”

Her laugh was one I hoped I’d hear again soon. “Okay. You owe me details. Lots of them, including about that hunky man out there.”

“I promise we’ll have a bottle of wine or two and I’ll tell you everything.”

She squeezed my arm before heading toward the door. It was impossible not to notice the hard onceover she gave Alessandro as she walked by. If he noticed her blatant lewd glance, it didn’t register. He’d been resting against the side of what I’d learned was a rental car since we’d arrived, the dark sunglasses unable to hide his intense stare.

I turned around, purposely avoiding his heated gaze. I was surprised he hadn’t rushed inside, taking me by the arm, chastising me for taking too long. That would come later. Was it possible Tristen was alive? Really? At this point I couldn’t be certain of anything. My entire world had been turned upside down. Everything I’d believed in for the last five years was a complete lie.

“Brittany, did you take the trash from the back room out last night?”

Her nose wrinkled as it always did when caught in forgetting whatever closing duties. At this point, I hoped she’d been reliably forgetful. “I’m sorry, Sierra. I carried a bag around the store when I collected trash, and pitched it into the dumpster when I left. I’ll get it now.”

I threw my hand out a little too quickly, shocking her. “No, don’t worry about it.”

“Okay.”

Of course she was looking at me strangely. I glanced at the roses before heading into the back, staring at the trash can where the card had been tossed. Thank God it wasn’t full. I dragged the entire contents to the back door and out to the alley where the dumpster was located, picking out the empty bottles of wine and napkins, wrinkling my nose from the smell of uneaten cheese. After two minutes, I was completely discouraged, ready to toss the rest before my captor suddenly appeared.

Then I noticed it. Leaning over, I grabbed the envelope, hissing from the sight of red wine staining half of it. After glancing over my shoulder, I carefully peeled the flap away, sliding the plain white card into my fingers. At least fifty percent of the words had been smudged into red blobs.

But I knew the quote even though I could only read a few words.

“The undead did not love, but they remembered love with a savage loyalty,” I whispered the words penned by Kim Harrison and closed my eyes.

I also knew who’d said them more than once.

Tristen.

CHAPTER 14



*A*lessandro

“Are you going to tell me why you demanded I meet you here?” Cruz asked as he swaggered toward me, yanking off his Ray-Bans, peering at me with vindictiveness in his steely eyes.

I took a deep breath, enjoying the brisk morning air. While I enjoyed certain aspects of being in New York City, I preferred the beautiful landscaping and turbulent waters of the Atlantic Ocean. With the sun casting a reflective glow, the early morning vista was spectacular.

But that wasn't why I was here.

There was unfinished business that needed to be handled. I'd also come to the conclusion that having my brother on my side was infinitely better than continuing the great divide in our family. If not, the pristine waters would soon become murky with bloodshed and grime. Word on the street was that the great Montenegro family had lost significant power, which made us ripe for further attempts to lay claim to our empire.

That couldn't happen.

The Montenegro family owned dozens of businesses, some of them small additions to the portfolio that made little money. Many of the deeds were signed over due to unpaid loans and gambling debts. Several had provided interesting opportunities, including the building nestled on an acre of land, the front serving as a premier bakery. The building was

large enough it provided ample prospects, including being used for several more grueling interrogation sessions. The thick cinderblock walls helped create a soundproof environment, even during the busiest times of day, customers coming and going.

The environment also reminded me of the basic cage I'd been shoved into four years before.

"The raid. How did it happen?" I asked the question with no adverse inflection. I was curious as to his thoughts.

"I'll tell you exactly how it happened. A rat."

I nodded, adjusting my sunglasses as I took another deep breath. "Undoubtedly. Any in particular?" I'd left Matteo with my soon-to-be bride, ensuring her safety as well as squelching any attempt at escape. While she'd made no attempt at getting away during our day of travel, nor had she continued her rebellious attitude, that didn't mean she wasn't planning her disappearance. The woman was clever, and I sensed she was hiding something from me.

Cruz half laughed as he lifted his hand, giving his Capo a hand signal. "Jordan. Bring me my prize. It would seem one of my men is the brother-in-law of a detective in New York's finest."

"You didn't know this when you hired him?"

"The relationship is new, as of three months ago."

I shook my head. "Meaning the raid was being planned for three months. I'm curious how the man was turned."

"That's what we'll find out." Cruz grinned as Jordan took long strides toward the back of the SUV, throwing open the hatch then dragging a bound, bloodied man onto the ground. Without hesitation, his Capo jerked the man across the pavement in our direction.

Butch snorted from behind me. He was eager to continue the daily maintenance on Tristen's partner, which was the reason I'd asked Cruz to the secure location in the first place. It was time he understood the reason I'd been angry with him for not rounding up every asshole involved in my arrest. If Tristen had information and was indeed considering selling it to the

highest bidder, then our empire would be fucked. Granted, I was uncertain how much data he'd collected, but given his access, there could be a power exchange within hours.

Tristen had called it my guillotine. An entire database of names of ugly, often criminal proclivities of members of government, Fortune 500 companies, celebrities, and politicians. It was the kind of information worth millions, but it wasn't about money. Keeping the blade sharp was all about power and control.

As the rat was dumped at my feet, Cruz walked closer. There was no chance I could recognize the poor bastard given the effort used to prime him for the interrogation. My brother's methods were as savage as mine.

"The fuck hasn't admitted his guilt," Cruz said before kicking the man over.

"What does it matter? The deed is done."

"Yes, but a message needs to be sent."

"Did you stop and think about the fact this brother-in-law will come after you?" Now I was reflecting recommendations made by Edwardo. I almost laughed at the thought.

"Not unless his body is found, and I assure you that it won't be." Cruz's eyes twinkled as he gazed toward the rough ocean waters. "Get him inside," he directed, slowly turning his head in my direction.

"Get everything ready," I told Butch and Sam, not bothering to look in their direction. They knew what to do. They'd been with me for years just like Jordan had with Cruz. When we were finally alone, I continued contemplating what I would say to my brother. Family business was never easy, especially when we had played tug of war as often as we had.

He watched as the rat was dragged away, the man finally attempting to get out of his shackles. "We lost a significant amount of money."

"Yes, so I heard. Have the operations been moved?"

“At this point, they remain shuttered, but my plans are to restart later this week.”

“Have the Feds been asking questions?”

“Dozens of them, but none of the businesses are in our name.”

This was something I hadn't heard. “A new dummy corporation?”

He had a smirk on his face as he looked at me. “I'm no fool, Alessandro, no matter what you like to believe. I knew as soon as Edwardo told us about the possibility of your release that we'd become another target. You underestimated my business acumen as you always have.”

If he was looking for compliments, he wasn't going to get them. I wasn't in the mood. “They're not finished yet, Cruz. They have plans to put me behind bars for a long time.” Perhaps I was testing his loyalty in my effort to weed out those capable of betrayal.

“You're asking me if I had anything to do with your arrest.” His expression was almost unreadable. The young man who'd always worn his emotions on his sleeve had learned to hide his feelings. Good for him. That would help keep him alive.

“Since you brought it up. I will ask. Did you?”

He moved closer until we were only inches apart. “We've never been very close, Alessandro, at least not since we were much younger. That's no secret to anyone, but blood is thicker than water.”

“But money and power are significant lures.”

His laugh was bitter. “We're both wealthy men, powerful in our own right. What good would it serve me to divide our family when the Russians continue to make their presence known, the Irish acting as if it's their God-given right to own New York? Is that why you asked me here? Or were you planning on using your men to interrogate me, hoping for a confession?”

While his questions irked the shit out of me, I believed him. “My men managed to locate Tristen's business partner.”

He seemed confused. “What does that matter now? He had nothing to do with our organization.”

“So we were led to believe.”

“What are you suggesting?”

“That Tristen gathered intel that could damage our reputation, destroying our hold.”

“You just came to that conclusion?”

“No, brother,” I huffed. “As I told both you and our father years ago, I didn’t buy the bullshit that Tristen was dead.”

“Then why hasn’t he used the information up to this point?”

I took another deep breath, holding it for several seconds. “That’s what I’m attempting to uncover.”

He laughed again as he shoved his sunglasses into his suit jacket. “WITSEC, huh? You really believe that crap?”

“It’s plausible.”

“If that’s the case, finding him will be like finding a needle in a haystack. You know that as well as I do.”

“Not if I have something that belongs to him.”

Cruz narrowed his eyes, searching mine. “Tristen had material things, but nothing that would matter to either one of us.”

“That’s where you’re wrong.” I made the decision to trust him, although I wouldn’t lay all my cards down. While blood was thicker than water, it could easily be diluted.

“You have my full attention.”

“Tristen was engaged.”

Snorting, he cocked his head. Then his eyes opened wide. “You have her in your possession. Don’t you?”

“We’re going to be married.”

He didn’t react for a full ten seconds. Then he burst into laughter. “I have to give you credit. A brilliant plan, unless of course Tristen was killed in that crash. What then? What do

you do with her? I've never known you to give a shit about having a family."

My brother must have seen a slight twitch or perhaps noticed a change in my breathing.

"Wait a fucking minute. You like this girl. Shit."

His exclamation pulled at two emotions, the dichotomy surprising me. Anger and angst. They didn't play well together. "She's a possession and nothing more."

"But you have fun playing with her. For once I can say I admire your style."

"Yes, well, we shall see. From here on out, it will necessary that you and I work together if what I believe is the truth. The Feds will be crawling all over the possibility if they get wind of the woman's identity."

He acted as if he was going to say no. We locked eyes for a full minute until he gave me a single nod. "Understood. When is the wedding taking place?"

"One week. First, photographs for the fucking *New York Times*. It should be big freaking news." I thought about my last conversation with Sierra and sighed. She'd been smug about my announcement regarding the photographs, asking for a burner phone in return in order to keep in contact with the woman taking care of her bistro. I was still debating whether I would allow it.

"I'm certain it will be the event of the year." He continued to be amused, but this time I didn't take offense. "What do you hope to gain from Tristen's partner?"

"To be honest with you, I want the man terrified for his life, enough so he breaches WITSEC protocol and attempts to contact his partner of several years."

"Also interesting. That means you're going to allow him to live."

"Why the hell not? It's amazing what putting the fear of God into someone can do, the benefits earned from giving them a

second chance at life.” It was something my father had taught me, a method I’d balked against until now.

“Is this possession of yours anything special? Is she a senator’s daughter or a socialite?”

“She’s nobody.” As soon as I’d spouted off the lie, another pang of angst slammed into my system. Sierra was a very special woman, so much so that I remained on edge.

“Even if that’s the case, brother, she’ll become an instant target.”

“I’m well aware of that. Anyone attempting to harm her will be dealt with.” As I locked eyes with him, his smirk turned into one of respect. “I’ll need a best man.”

“Are you seriously asking me?” For the first time in as long as I could remember, I noticed an entirely different look in my brother’s eyes. I suddenly remembered the kid who used to tag along whenever he could, refusing to be insulted by the words of condemnation I’d use to try to get him to leave me alone.

I’d been a shit for a big brother, but having a happy-go-lucky kid eight years younger didn’t bode well for the brutal teenager I’d become. The business had hardened him, which for some crazy reason drew an entirely different feeling of anger. He’d wanted to be an artist, not one of the princes of darkness, as we’d been called by a tenacious reporter.

He didn’t seem to care that the wedding was pretend. “Yeah, I’m asking.”

Cruz studied my eyes, trying to determine if I was being serious. When he nodded several times, a small part of me felt like shit. “I’d be honored. When do I get to meet the girl?”

“Soon, brother. Very soon. Let’s have a conversation together with Mr. Sampson and see if we can confirm whether or not Tristen is alive.”

“This should be fun.”

Fun.

He’d been the protected son, the one who’d been allowed to live out his dreams until the day he turned twelve. Then his art

had been stripped away by our father, his beloved paintings tossed into the garbage. I'd never forget the day my brother's dreams had been crushed. I'd sensed he'd blamed me, the frank and usually harsh jabs I'd made at his prized possessions something he'd never forgotten.

What he hadn't known was that he'd been the lucky one, our father taking it easy on him because of our mother. Not only had I not been allowed to live out my childhood fantasies given I was the firstborn, I'd also been beaten several times by my father's hand for not becoming a carbon copy. At least my brother had been spared the abuse.

We walked in through the bakery to the hidden door, moving down a soundproofed hallway toward the main event room. Jordan had tossed the rat into a cage where he belonged, but Joseph Sampson had been pulled out of his, hosed down in preparation for our discussion. Blood still pooled by his feet from the beatings he'd received, the foamy trickle slowly heading toward the floor drain.

I moved closer, giving him the respect of looking him in the eyes. "Joseph. It's been a long time." I didn't ask what methods Matteo had instructed be used, but I could tell the man was struggling with pain while attempting to act as if the entire situation didn't bother him.

"What the... hell do you... want from me?" he asked, although it was difficult to understand his muddled words.

"The truth."

"About what?" His exclamation boomed in the space, a surprise given his condition. He was a huge man, a solid two hundred fifty pounds of muscle. Perhaps he'd conditioned himself to endure pain.

"About your old partner."

He eyed me carefully, but there was no flicker that would indicate anything other than surprise. "He's dead."

"So I've heard. However, I don't buy it."

The same look remained but there was a slight glimmer in his eyes. Maybe I was making too much out of it. Or maybe not.

From what Tristen had told me, while Joseph knew of the relationship, he'd never approved of or had anything to do with the work Tristen had performed for me. I believed otherwise. I'd even challenged Tristen about that very observation a few weeks before all hell had broken loose.

"You're crazy. I was there on the scene. Fucking five minutes after the goddamn accident. You have no idea how... horrible it was."

I wanted to believe him, but there was something plastic about his words. I turned toward Cruz, amused when my brother shook his head slightly, an indication he thought the man was lying. That was all I needed.

"I'm going to offer you a reprieve, Joseph. I'm going to allow you to live."

Joseph stared at me with unbelieving eyes. "Why?"

I took my time answering, walking closer until I made him uncomfortable, one eye twitching. "Because you're going to follow a single order. Failure to do so will result in your... termination."

The stench of sweat and piss assaulted my senses. While I usually enjoyed this aspect of my job, on a beautiful, crystal-clear morning the odor repulsed me. I preferred the sweet scent of flowers and vanilla, which was exactly the aroma consistently floating into my nostrils every time I was in Sierra's presence.

When he didn't answer right away, Butch swung a pipe against his stomach, Joseph doubling over from the intense agony.

"Enough! He deserves a minute to determine whether he'll play by my rules or face the consequences."

After a full minute of wheezing, Joseph managed to shift to his full height, panting hot breath into my face. "What... do you... want me to do?"

While he choked out the words, I could see at least a glimmer of sincerity in his eyes. "Find Tristen. Tell him that there isn't a single rock he can crawl under where I won't find him."

There was no acceptance of his task or denial of Tristen's state of existence, which I'd expected. When he didn't respond appropriately, I wrapped my hand around the hair on the back of his head, jerking his neck into an awkward position.

"My patience is wearing thin, Joseph. I suggest you not cross me any further."

"Fine," he spit out, his eyes now full of anger and hatred.

As well as continued fear.

Satisfied I'd have no further issues with the man, I released my hold, watching as his head dropped into an uncomfortable position. Then I turned away, Cruz following me until we were out of hearing range.

"What do you think?" he asked.

"Tristen's alive, holed up in some small town in Bumfuck USA."

Cruz said nothing for a few seconds. Then he moved so he could look me in the eyes. "I think you're right, brother, but this is a dangerous game to play. Our entire organization appears to be on a thin line."

"You know how I enjoy taking risks." I couldn't help but grin.

"Yeah, I do. Just be careful it doesn't get you killed or worse."

"What could be worse?"

"Falling in love." His expression was mischievous, a blatant attempt to discover my feelings for Sierra.

"That's not going to happen."

As Butch approached, a gleam in his eye, I knew what he wanted. Additional blood.

"What now, boss?" he asked. The man bordered on barbaric.

"Send him on his way with a parting gift. Shove him onto a first-class flight back to Florida." Why not send him back in style, minus a couple of unneeded digits on one hand.

"You got it, boss."

Cruz lifted an eyebrow, but his grin remained. “You are a brutal man.”

“Which has served me well. Can you handle cleaning up the trash?”

“One of the most enjoyable parts of my day.”

I glanced into his eyes, realizing I could no longer see the young boy who’d longed to live in Paris, creating sensual paintings of the world around him. For a brief few seconds, I missed the brother I’d once had, a kid with a kind heart and a deep, passionate soul.

I wondered what he’d be like today if his spirit hadn’t been crushed.

As I headed down the hallway, I cringed for the first time from hearing the savagery of the life both Cruz and I had been born into.

I’d spoken about salvation to an innocent creature who’d never expected to fall into the clutches of a monster.

I’d told her that I’d never lie to her, but that had occurred within the first few seconds of our first phone call.

There was no salvation for a man who’d been born without a soul.

CHAPTER 15



*S*ierra

“Beauty is in the eye of the beholder who allows the rays of sun to filter into their minds.”

It was something my mother used to say many years before. When I was little, I’d believed she was an angel sent from the heavens to watch out over me. The day I’d turned twelve, I’d started believing her place on earth was to drive me insane.

I resisted laughing as I thought about how much she’d taught me over the years, even if I hadn’t been receptive to most of her advice. I tried to imagine what her thoughts would be at this moment. First, she wouldn’t believe I’d agree to such a preposterous plan, especially given the level of danger. Then she’d frown in such a manner that I’d know she was peeling away all the protective layers I’d formed around me, digging for the real reason why I’d agreed.

“Marriage is a commitment that isn’t for the faint of heart. It’s not like a lease on a car that you can trade in once it expires. It’s one of the hardest things you’ll ever be involved in.”

The day she’d shared that tidbit of knowledge with me was the moment I’d stopped believing in fairytales.

A million dollars for six months of pretending.

But would I be living a lie or merely indulging in some crazy fantasy that I could change the man I... craved? There was no other rational response. I couldn't love him. He didn't want to be adored or cared for. He certainly wasn't the kind of man who could tolerate a doting wife and three perfect kids.

A chuckle finally erupted, the sound making me self-conscious. I threw a glance over my shoulder and gazed into the eyes of one of Alessandro's soldiers.

Matteo.

I hadn't learned his last name and if I had to guess, I'd say asking the nice-looking brute any questions wasn't allowed. That only made me want to bombard him with them. I stared out the window at the incredible colors crisscrossing the afternoon sky and felt a twinge of strong emotions.

Fear.

Anxiety.

Uncertainty.

While all three were justified, the fourth continued to perplex me. Excitement. I'd expected to be faced with a gorgeous but sterile view of New York City. Being sequestered in a stunning, oversized Cape Cod in the Hamptons had been an unexpected delight. While the house was large by typical standards, it paled in comparison of size to the others in the neighborhood. That made me adore it that much more.

What the structure lacked in size was made up in the incredible location. Nestled a hundred yards from the ocean, the rocky shore was curved, allowing for a spectacular view. The location was also extremely private, the long, gated driveway complete with security cameras. There was also a six-foot-tall iron fence enclosing the house and a good portion of the grounds. While I wouldn't call his home a fortress, Alessandro would know if anyone was attempting to gain access.

He'd been gone a good portion of the day. Although he'd never mentioned I'd be locked in the house, having a guard stand by me if I changed rooms was a clear reminder that I

was still considered a prisoner. Only instead of the bleak cinder block walls he'd been caged in, mine was a gilded cage with posh surroundings.

"Is it alright for me to go outside?" I wasn't entirely certain the stoic man would answer me. When I'd been formally introduced, he'd said nothing, but his stare had been ice cold.

"As long as I'm with you."

"Does Alessandro honestly think I'm going to run away?"

Matteo eyed me carefully, obviously uncertain how to respond. "I'm not privy to the status of your relationship. What I do know is that Mr. Montenegro has many enemies."

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning they would stop at nothing to inflict pain."

The man's words weren't as disturbing as the warning laced in his voice. I took a deep breath, unlocking and opening the door. As soon as I walked outside, I inhaled. The salty air was breathtaking, the chilly light breeze refreshing. I gripped the railing with both hands, digging my fingers into the wood. The sand shimmered from the reflection of the sun, casting a colorful hue across the surface. The water seemed agitated, although it was a perfectly calm day with only a light breeze stirring the trees lining both sides of the house.

I felt Matteo's presence behind me and stiffened. "How can you stand this life?"

He remained quiet for several seconds, likely attempting to determine whether he should bother talking with me. I was surprised when he answered candidly.

"When you grow up poor, you have very few choices. I didn't have the grades for scholarships, and no one was gonna give me a loan."

"So working for a brutal man is a better choice?"

I was even more surprised when he moved to the railing, although he kept his distance. When I looked over, I easily noticed the weapon placed behind his back. Even if my marriage only lasted six months, was this the kind of life I

could tolerate? I closed my eyes, enjoying the sun's warmth, trying to block out my continuous memories of discussions with Tristen. They were all leading in a direction that made me feel more like a fool.

"I was stupid enough to pull a knife on Mr. Montenegro when he was leaving a restaurant, demanding he turn over his wallet. I had no idea who his father was or what they could do to me. Ten seconds later, I was on my back in an alley, staring into the barrels of two weapons. I said a prayer that day, something I'd sworn I'd never do again, 'cause I knew I was going to die."

I glanced in his direction, trying to imagine what his life had been like. "What happened?"

"When I didn't say a single word, Alessandro threw me against a wall, searching for drugs. When he found nothing, he demanded I tell him what the hell I needed money for. I didn't think I had a choice, so I told him."

"Why did you accost him?"

"I told him it was for food for my mother and little sister. My mother hadn't worked in a few months because she was sick. We had nothing. I couldn't get a job given my age and public aid didn't do shit for us. Nobody cared."

"That's when he offered you a job?"

"Nah, at least not right away. He let me go with a warning that if I ever bothered him again, I'd pay a price. He also made me promise to continue taking care of my family."

I tried not to laugh but it was difficult. "Well, I guess that's one way to obtain loyalty."

"Don't mock what you don't know, Ms. Wynters, and I mean you no disrespect. One of his soldiers was told to take me home and he did. The next day there was a knock on the door. It was a delivery driver with tons of food and toys, clothes and supplies. And an envelope full of cash. I will never forget Mr. Montenegro's generosity. Two years later on the day I turned eighteen, I read he'd taken over as Don of his father's regime.

I walked into his office and told him all the reasons he should hire me.”

Very few stories took me aback, but I could see by the look of pride and respect on his face how much loyalty he had for Alessandro. “What did he say?”

“He asked me a couple questions then hired me on the spot. A little over a year after that, I was able to buy my mama a house in a good neighborhood. I’m very proud of that.”

“You should be, Matteo. That’s incredible. I’m curious. What did he ask you? If you enjoyed killing people? If you had a brutal streak?”

“No, Ms. Wynters. You don’t know him very well.”

I sensed Alessandro’s presence from the electricity skimming the back of my legs, the increase in my pulse. When I turned my head, the strangest feeling rushed through me, something even more unexplainable than the ridiculous way I’d acted the first night at the bistro.

A deep longing, but not entirely because of Alessandro’s extreme good looks or the ruggedness of his physique, but because a small part of me was genuinely happy to see him. That was almost as insane as my body’s reaction, except it wasn’t. He’d chatted with me on the plane ride. Correction, he’d talked to me, not with me. I’d said very little, mostly because I wasn’t certain what to say or if I wanted to talk to him. So he’d talked.

It hadn’t been about business or gloating about how much money he had. Every question I did ask he’d answered thoroughly, including those I’d thought for certain he’d laugh at. Personal questions. Likes. Dislikes. I’d been nervous for about a dozen reasons, barely able to keep any food or drink down without racing toward the cramped bathroom. I’d also been more emotional than I’d wanted, alternating between fury and tears, most of which were directed toward Tristen.

Another ridiculous aspect.

Now he had his arms folded as he leaned against the doorway, studying me so intently my breath was stolen. The Spaniard

had a certain way about him, a dark command that refused to take a backseat to anything else. Then he walked toward us, his eyes never leaving me. “I asked him if he’d kept his promise made to me, which I learned he had. Then I asked him if he understood the meaning of loyalty.”

“What did you answer?” I turned my attention to Matteo.

“I said I did. When Mr. Montenegro pressed me, I told him that loyalty meant doing whatever was necessary, no matter how uncomfortable or unsavory in order to protect a friendship, a business relationship, or the people I loved.” Matteo looked away, a slight smile crossing his face.

“That’s why I hired him. Not because he’d shot a weapon or was strong as an ox, and certainly not because he had the same level of bloodlust I did. What I was looking for were those people I could count on through thick or thin,” Alessandro said as he closed the distance, rolling his fingers lightly down my cheek.

I shivered from the tender touch, the sensual look in his eyes. “I should have known.”

“Known what? That I have two sides like everyone else? You can go, Matteo.” He didn’t issue the command unkindly, but Matteo left without saying another word, leaving the two of us alone. “It seems you continue to underestimate me, Sierra. I’ve never claimed to be a good man and very few people surprise me, but the night Matteo stuck a knife in my face, he caught me off guard. I was the crown prince of the Montenegro Empire. I had soldiers with me everywhere I went, treated like royalty because of who my father was and what he could do if they didn’t treat me with honor and respect.”

“How fascinating,” I offered, my words more condescending than I’d intended.

“For a young man who’d been broken into the lifestyle, taught that nothing less than the best was acceptable, it was enticing as hell. Don’t get me wrong. The wealth and the perks I grew up with were and still are wonderful, albeit you learn eventually even power has its dark side. But it took Matteo’s ability to shove the sharp blade of a knife under my chin when

no one else had ever gotten that close to force me to realize my vulnerability. His plight allowed a rich boy with a bad attitude to understand the meaning of poverty.”

“That was very generous of you.”

He slid a strand of hair out of my face then brushed his fingers down my neck, the action continuing to provide tingles. “Don’t assume I had a soul at that point either, *mi dulce gatita*. It was beaten out of me long before. However, the moment I heard about his younger sister, I knew I had to help.”

“Beaten out of you. By whom?”

As he slipped his arm around me, yanking me against his chest, I sensed an ugliness from his past that was the real reason ice ran through his veins. “It no longer matters. Tell me, Sierra. Do you still hate me?”

I pressed my hands against his chest, uncertain how to answer his question. “I like the man you showed me on the plane, the one without an agenda. I also like the dark stranger who entered my life. I’m curious about who he is and what makes him tick.”

He lowered his head until our lips were only centimeters apart. As he whispered, the heated air blown across my lips left me breathless. “The dark stranger is a sadist, his tortured dreams threatening to derail the man he’s become. He longs for a partner who desires a taste of his madness.”

As he captured my mouth, I curled my fist around his shirt, rising onto my tiptoes. The words were powerful in their admittance because I knew he was telling me the truth, sharing a part of him he’d kept locked away. My heart thudded rapidly as he placed his hand under my chin, the hold more possessive than any of the others had been. The taste of him was sweet, the hint of cinnamon infusing my senses. I was thrown by how lightheaded the intimate touch made me, the simplicity of the tender moment as freeing as the roughness of our sex.

Every time I was in his arms, it felt as if I was spiraling out of control, no longer able to make sense of my life or a single need. He’d managed to unravel the deepest part of me,

subjecting my tender heart to his well-crafted plan. What I'd come to realize was that even though he'd developed the game, acting as puppeteer, I'd created the magic we shared. And now, he couldn't get free of the stranglehold our electric connection had become any more than I could.

We were two perfect strangers whose destiny was forged in the fires of revenge.

As the kiss became even more powerful, the flow of passion becoming explosive, another barrier of defense had fallen, exposing another portion of my heart. How could this savage man have such an intense effect on every part of me?

He thrust his tongue inside, exploring the dark recesses as his actions became more brutal, the kiss just a taste of his domination. As his scent infused my senses, I realized I was falling for him. There was no rational reason, no sense of why, but it was impossible to lie to myself as much as I'd wanted to.

When he broke the moment of intimacy, he squeezed my jaw as he rubbed his thumb back and forth. "You kiss me as if your life depended on it, my sweet kitten. I hope it doesn't come to that." He backed away slowly, his wry smile returning as he held out his hand. "Come, my bride to be. I have some things for you."

He took me by the fingers, leading me inside and into another room. There were dozens of bags from various stores, only some of which I recognized and of those I did, I'd never been able to afford a single item from any of them. I didn't feel as if he was flaunting his wealth, merely allowing me a taste of the finer things in life since I'd agreed to his deal.

"I had a girl at my office make some selections for you. If you don't like them, they can be returned."

"You do realize I'm a jeans and tee shirt kind of girl."

"While that may be true, there are certain times that you'll be required to wear more appropriate attire."

"Like for our engagement photographs." I glanced into his eyes, uncertain what I was looking for. Maybe a single spark that told me a small part of him wanted the marriage to be real.

What I noticed just confirmed the obvious. This was nothing more than a business arrangement where the perks were powerful as well as all consuming.

He yanked off his jacket, tossing it on one of the chairs. Then he rolled up his sleeves and all the while I studied the black onyx ring on his finger. It was a symbol of his family's power. It was also a warning to anyone in close proximity.

Don't fuck with him.

"Whatever makes you comfortable, Sierra. It's not black tie. You're aware of the goal."

"You're right. I am. A deal made with the devil should be sealed with a blood oath. Don't you think?" I wasn't certain why I asked something so ridiculous, but I no longer recognized myself. For a few minutes, I'd fallen into the trap of thinking this was real instead of a twisted fairytale that could only end in a nightmare.

His expression returned to one of amusement. "What you must think of me."

"You know what I think about you. I don't mince words."

"No, you do not, which is something else I adore about you."

"Something else?"

With smoldering eyes like his, I could easily become lost in the moment, forgetting that this was nothing but a game. "Allow me to correct my statement. Not just something, *gatita*. Everything. You are an insatiable draw, a light in the darkness. That makes you irresistible."

I dragged my tongue across my lips, trying to avoid his heated gaze as I thought about how to respond, when a hard rap on the door drew both our attention.

"What is it, Matteo?" Alessandro asked.

"The Feds are here."

Instinctively, I took a deep breath as I waited for Alessandro's reaction. The fact that he was smiling put me more on edge than if he'd expressed anger.

“Have them taken to the patio, Matteo. I’ll join them there.”

Matteo seemed as surprised by his reaction as I was, his eyes opening wide. “Yes, boss.”

“The FBI?”

“Yes, Sierra. There was a raid on several of my businesses while I was spending time with something much more important.” His eyes bore the darkness of his soul while the gold flecks around his irises glistened in the stream of sunlight coming in through the window. “You need to stay here.”

He wasn’t ready to show me off to the world. I still couldn’t understand how he could live his life this way.

“A raid. As in they’re looking for a reason to throw you back into prison. Doesn’t that bother you?”

“You’re very perceptive, but at this point I’m not concerned. Granted, that’s exactly what they’re doing, hoping to toss me in prison and lose the key. However, my brother handled the issue by protecting the ownership of several important businesses. In other words, the Feds are fishing. Or they’re here because Tristen provided them with additional information that he acquired before his... death. The truth is, it’s a crap shoot as to which is the case.”

He was having far too much fun with this. I shouldn’t be surprised by anything he did any longer. “You really believe they have an arrest warrant?”

“Possibly. I wouldn’t put anything past them, but I honestly believe they are searching for answers.”

“You’re playing a dangerous game of Russian roulette.”

“What would life be without some dangerous risks? It would seem you’re worried, *gatita*.”

I shook my head. “I’m... concerned for you. You’re playing with fire, Alessandro. The revenge you seek might destroy everything you’ve built, what your family has built over the years. Is it really worth it?”

“Is that the truth, Sierra? You agreed to what you call a ‘deal with the devil’ because you require truth. Is it worth losing six

months of your life or your business?”

I looked away, uncertain how to answer his question.

“That’s something you should have asked yourself before you agreed. My world is all about calculating the risks I mentioned. One day I will crash and burn, but not today. That much I can promise you.” He took long strides toward the door and I couldn’t take my eyes off him.

“Don’t make promises you can’t keep.”

He stopped short, twisting his head until he was able to see me. “If I didn’t know better, my kitten, I’d say you cared about me. Be careful that you don’t get burned in the process.”

As he walked out, I realized I wasn’t worried about losing six months and I knew the business would survive if necessary. What I was worried about was losing my heart.

* * *

Alessandro

The two men who remained standing outside on the patio were young enough that I sensed they were either hoping for an impressive collar or the Feds were only yanking my chain. Either way, I remained amused given the way they studied me as I approached.

“Gentlemen. To what do I owe this pleasure?” I asked as I glanced from one to the other. I’d always found it amusing that I could tell an agent a hundred yards away.

“I’m Agent Sykes, and this is Agent Walker. We’re here to ask you a few questions regarding incidents that occurred in several of your businesses.”

“And what would that be?” I asked.

“Illegal gambling,” Agent Walker stated then looked me in the eyes.

I didn't flinch. There was no reason to. "While I read about the raids on the internet, none of those businesses are operated by any Montenegro corporation, but I'm certain you already know that."

One looked at the other. "I don't think you understand the severity of the situation."

All I could do was laugh. "I think you're fishing, gentlemen, and while I understand your need to rid the world of men and women who enjoy betting on childish games, you've come to the wrong place for either assistance or advice. The companies my family handles are all reputable business establishments. Now, if you have further questions, feel free to contact my attorney. I'll be happy to provide his name, although I'm also fairly certain you have dossiers on my entire family, my friends, my employees as well as my family. Don't you, boys?"

For as young as Agent Sykes appeared to be, he was bold in his determination to help bring down a horrible man, approaching without fear in his eyes. "Mr. Montenegro. We're aware of the fact that you left the state without express permission of your parole officer, thereby breaking the terms of agreement for your release. Under the circumstances and given your lack of cooperation, we will have to report this to the proper authorities."

"Is there a problem?" Sierra asked as she slipped by my side. The woman never ceased to surprise me.

"And you are?" Sykes asked, immediately bristling.

"I might ask you the same question," she countered.

While I should be angry with her for ignoring my command, her attitude as well as the harsh look she was giving them created a hard twitch in my cock. No woman had ever stood up to me the way she had and managed to defy me at every turn.

"These are federal agents, *gatita*," I said, allowing her to enjoy the game as much as I was.

“And you are here for what reason other than to harass my fiancé?”

The two of them glanced at each other again.

“What is your name, miss?” Walker asked as he removed a notepad and pen.

“Sierra Wynters. May I see some identification?” She wasn’t asking. She was demanding. When she held out her hand, her expression was stern, unrelenting.

While they both pulled out their credentials, I backed away, refusing to interfere. However, I gathered a sense that the two men were absorbing the entire scene, gathering information to fortify their case. It was obvious given their reactions, cautious questions. As if they really believed I would incriminate myself. This was a wild goose chase that they intended to lead to a more permanent prosecution. I would need to have a conversation with Edwardo.

“Specifically, why are you here hassling Alessandro?” she pressed on.

“We are here investigating a case, Ms. Wynters, where egregious crimes were committed.”

“They are concerned I violated my parole.”

“Hmmm... Are they now? In what way?”

“It’s come to our knowledge that Mr. Montenegro left town,” Sykes commented, although it was apparent he was backing off from the questions. The eagerness in his voice had all but disappeared.

She glanced in my direction, searching my eyes. “When?”

“Three nights ago,” Walker answered.

“Your information is wrong. Alessandro and I were here enjoying some... quiet time.”

“Do you have any evidence to prove that or witnesses who saw you?”

In my opinion, Walker was digging himself a hole.

She laughed, pressing her hand over her mouth. “Unless you’d like to see one of our very *special* movies, then no. As I said, we were enjoying and engaging in some delicious, filthy private time.” She looked from one to the other as she placed her hand on her hip.

Sykes narrowed his eyes, but I could tell he’d put two and two together, recognizing her name.

“That won’t be necessary, at least for now.” Walker closed his notebook without taking a single additional note other than her name. There was no question about what she did or where she lived.

Because they already knew the answers.

“That’s all we need at this time, Mr. Montenegro, but I suggest you remember that you’re required to remain in the state.” Sykes was indeed pressing his luck with me.

“I have no intentions of leaving my beautiful home, agents. I have a wedding to plan. I do hope you’ll consider attending.” It had been a long time since playing with the Feds had been this enjoyable.

“We just might do that,” Sykes said between clenched teeth.

“I’ll have Matteo show you out.” I pressed my finger against her forehead, narrowing my eyes. “Stay here, my *gatita*. I mean right here. You and I have unfinished business.”

“I like the sound of that,” she purred.

As I walked them to the door, I knew the best thing to do was to escalate the timing as much as possible. I’d have someone arrange for a photographer as well as a glitzy caption in the *Times*. After handing them off to Matteo, I returned to the patio, watching her for a few seconds as she stood staring out at the ocean. “Would you like to take a walk?”

“I’d love that.”

I waited as she removed her shoes, tossing them aside then heading toward the stairs leading to the water without waiting for me. I’d never felt this way around anyone else—with a single exception. That had been years before, but it had

provided a solid reason why my line of work and an attempt at a relationship didn't serve my best interests.

As I followed Sierra, she finally sensed my presence, turning around to face me as she continued to walk backwards. The smile on her face was unexpected, as if she'd enjoyed the confrontation as much as I had. There was a coyness about her that was more beguiling than I originally thought, her ability to adapt a true treasure.

But it was the look in her eyes as she allowed her gaze to fall, shaking her head as she pointed to my shoes. I laughed softly, enjoying the quiet moment. I'd had such a few in my life. Even my mother had commented that I needed to settle down and find someone to balance out my life. As usual, I'd waved it off, refusing to take her advice, but perhaps she had been right. Was it possible that I could find happiness in the world in which I lived? More important, could I keep Sierra safe when she'd be the single weakness that could bring me to my knees?

It wasn't a question I took lightly. Six months was possible, but the rest of my life, a family involved? I wasn't certain I could run the risk. The last thing I wanted was to cause her harm.

I yanked off my shoes and at that point, she'd run toward the water's edge and stuck her feet in. It was more difficult than ever to maintain my control, the need for her increasing every hour. Hell, every minute. As I sauntered closer, I thought about all the filthy things I wanted to do to her.

But it wasn't just about kissing her soft lips, fucking her until she was sore but sated. What I longed for was to find a partner, someone who embraced the darkness and was able to provide the light she'd already managed to do.

As she twirled in the afternoon sun, laughing like a kid from the enjoyment of being near the ocean, I stopped short and allowed myself to watch her every move.

That was the moment I realized I was falling in love with her. It was a ridiculous reaction, at least to a part of my brain, but it was reality. Fuck. What the hell was I supposed to do now?

“What took you so long?” she yelled as I moved closer. The way she continuously brushed her hair from her eyes was enchanting. I wanted to devour her right here. Right now.

“I was watching my kitten in her glory.”

“Glory? You mean from shocking the agents? What if they ask for a hard copy of our sexual escapades?”

“Then I guess we’ll have to give them one.”

“Mmm... I like the sound of that.”

I approached, taking long strides. She continued to back away, teasing me as she loved to do. “You do, huh?”

“I can only imagine what you’d do to me. Would you tie me up? Shackle me to your bed? Would you spank me like a bad little girl?”

It was impossible to keep from grinning while being around her. “Speaking of spankings. You disobeyed my orders.”

“I did?” She acted surprised, although I could tell she was faking it. “What did I do?”

“You didn’t stay in the house.”

“But I might have kept you from going to jail. Doesn’t that count?”

I slowed down, rubbing my jaw on purpose. “Not in the least.” As I took off running after her, for the first time in as long as I could remember, I felt lighthearted, no longer burdened by the details of running the business or surrendering to the ugliness of the decisions I had to make. There was blood on my hands, but when I was with her, all the evils I’d done seemed to fade away.

She yelped when she noticed what I was doing, and then took off running down the beach toward the bank of trees. I caught her just a few feet before she managed to dart into the forest and pulled her back by several feet. As she usually did, she struggled in my hold, pummeling her fists against me, but there was no conviction in her actions, just a level of playfulness I hadn’t seen before.

When she managed to yank my arm, we both toppled over into the wet sand, her laugh continuing.

“You’re such a bad man,” she purred, still wriggling underneath me.

“I think that attracts you. In fact, I know you crave the darkness.” I straddled her, pushing up from the sand, peering into her eyes.

She stopped moving, taking several shallow breaths. Then she pushed her palms against me for a few seconds before wrapping her fingers around my shirt, pulling me down to her. “Yes, I do.” When she eased her leg around mine, water rolled underneath our heated bodies, causing her to laugh.

As she lifted her head, she darted her eyes back and forth across me. “You aren’t good for me.”

“Definitely not.”

“But I’m not certain I can break free of your hold.”

“Good, because I’m not going to allow you to get away.” I crushed my mouth over hers, immediately thrusting my tongue inside.

She rolled her arm around my neck, tangling her fingers in my hair. Within seconds, the kiss was explosive, our tongues entwining, my cock aching to be inside of her. I couldn’t seem to get enough, my body aching from desire. She had no idea what she did to me or the insane level of control she’d managed to gain in a short period of time. The woman was a true powerhouse of her own, driving me to the point of madness.

My hunger knew no bounds and I would fuck her, spending hours examining every inch of her body, but not here. Tonight, I would take her like a lover, not like a beast.

But only after a round of discipline.

When I pulled away, I immediately yanked her up with me as I shifted into a sitting position, pulling her across my lap.

“What are you doing?” she gasped.

“Giving you a well-deserved spanking for ignoring my command.” I yanked up her dress, issuing several hard smacks, moving from one side to the other.

She moaned and wiggled, clawing at the sand in an effort to get off my lap, but I kept my hold firm, cracking my palm against her rounded bottom time after time.

“You don’t own me,” she moaned with zero conviction in her voice.

“That’s where you’re wrong, *gatita*. You agreed to a contract. Now, you’ll abide by all the terms of our agreement or face stiff consequences.”

Her pussy lips were swollen, glistening in the sunlight. I couldn’t resist rolling my finger down the crack of her ass, flicking it back and forth across her tender tissue. My mind was awash with the vision of fucking her like the animal I was. Little did she know what I had in store for her. My filthy thoughts were twisted, my needs building to a precipice that would likely consume us both. But I was free, untethered from the chains of running a brutal organization. Unshackled from the harsh reality of my existence. And unhinged, enough so all I could think about was devouring her.

Night after delicious night.

“Ouch! That hurts,” she squealed, almost able to slide off my lap. As I yanked her against me, my stiff cock pressing against her stomach, she threw her head over her shoulder, her mouth pursed and her long eyelashes skimming across her glistening cheeks as she blinked furiously.

“An intelligent woman like yourself should know that discipline is supposed to hurt in order to achieve positive results.”

“Bastard.”

Her hateful word pushed a grin across my face.

I continued the spanking, doing everything I could to control my natural tendencies.

We had all night to explore our wildest desires. This was just the beginning.

Within seconds, she was panting, her yelps of pain turning into moans of pleasure.

And dear God, I wanted her even more.

CHAPTER 16



“Sex is more than an act of pleasure, it’s the ability to be able to feel so close to a person, so connected, so comfortable that it’s almost breathtaking to the point you feel you can’t take it. And at this moment you’re a part of them.”

—Thom York

Sierra

Alessandro Montenegro evoked passion, raw and sizzling to the point that my heart was beating so rapidly, it was like the muscle was attempting to escape. When I looked at his hands, I realized they were skillful, mastering the art of teasing and probing, often rough then shifting to a tenderness that left me tingling all over. Every time I heard his voice, the dark, rich tone sending a sweeping softness of velvet dancing against my skin, filthy images tiptoed through my mind. And his kiss could be subtle in its power, changing almost instantly into a crazed, intense need that refused to be denied.

He had the ability to garner my rapt attention just by walking into the room where I was standing, his chest heaving as he inhaled my scent. And those were the moments I could read his mind, accepting and hungering for all the vile, dirty things he was determined to do.

And to take.

He wanted all of me.

He'd made that perfectly clear during the three days I'd spent at his house, hours tangled in his sheets.

I dragged my tongue across my lips, my nipples aching from the thought of the last time he'd kissed me, which had only been an hour before. It seemed like longer, an eternity, and I continued to find that strangely attractive as well as terrifying. How had he broken through every barrier so quickly? How had I fallen into a seductive trap so powerful that I could no longer see a single escape?

As I stared out the window, fixated on the vibrant colors dancing across the horizon, visions of the man popped into my mind. Then I sensed his presence as I always did, a trickle of searing heat coursing through me.

As I turned around, his nostrils flared instantly, the look in his eyes carnivorous, a predator ready to devour a prize from a long day's hunt. Then he locked eyes with mine, his gaze steely, in full command of the moment and the woman he called his obsessive possession.

At first I'd hated the term, denying that he had that kind of control over me. And now? I wasn't certain who I was any longer. While it made no sense and wouldn't to outsiders, the power of his method of seduction had lingering effects. Words stated what seemed to be a lifetime ago had imbedded themselves in my mind, a patient reminder that he'd begun to unravel me the very first night.

I allowed my heated gaze to fall across his broad shoulders down his chest, admiring the suit he'd selected for the series of photographs. He appeared even more powerful in the rich charcoal hue, the wool stretching taut across his thick thigh muscles accentuating his command. Even the crisp white shirt and vibrantly patterned tie added to the dangerous persona in a way that made my mouth water.

As he moved closer, he took several deep breaths, his eyes dilated. I couldn't move, couldn't breathe, and there was no reason anything was different other than the meaning of the evening. As of tomorrow morning, all of New York and likely the rest of the country would learn of our engagement. Soon, I

would be the talk of the town. I'd also have a target on my back.

He'd masterfully explained the situation and the reason I'd have a bodyguard with me at all times. While I wouldn't be forced to remain a prisoner in his house, I would be expected to follow the rules without hesitation. There was no other choice. The game had shifted into a higher gear. Alessandro was hungry to catch an entirely different prey.

I'd searched my soul, trying to ascertain why I'd agreed to such madness. The truth was more terrifying than the lies I'd told myself.

I wanted Tristen found. I wanted him to pay for his sins, for what he'd done to me, the angst and sadness I'd lived. If what Alessandro had told me was the truth, and I suspected that it was, Tristen hadn't turned state's evidence for anything but to keep his ass out of prison. Then he'd made himself a very wealthy man from the information he'd stolen.

That in no way made me feel guilty about my participation. Did he deserve to die? I wasn't ready to face that just yet.

Alessandro growled as he closed the distance, cupping the side of my face instantly, taking a few seconds to brush his thumb back and forth across my skin. He knew exactly how to keep me fully aroused, allowing him the delicacy of taking in the scent of our combined desire.

"You are dazzling tonight. Perfection," he drawled, his words capable of seducing me. They were half whispered, but there was no denying the electricity soaring through both of us. "Red suits you."

"Upon your insistence." He'd stood in the doorway to the bedroom, pushing a broad shoulder against the wooden surface, grinning as I'd suggested attire for the photographs. The moment I'd held up the gorgeous red silk dress, he'd simply pointed to it, saying nothing. The expensive frock accentuated every curve, the low V in the front and back leaving little to the imagination.

"I do love the color of crimson."

There was something about the way he mentioned the hue that made me think of blood pooling across a hardwood floor, soaking into the seams. An explosive shudder coursed through me, a small swirl of butterflies turning into thousands.

It was at that moment that another conversation I'd had with Tristen slid into my mind. We'd gone out to a few movies and had dinner at our favorite Mexican restaurant, but only once had we both dressed up, and Tristen had taken me to a fancy dinner at a posh private club.

"We need to leave," Tristen said, his entire demeanor changing from only seconds before.

"Why? What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong, Sierra. It's just time to go. That's all." He jerked on my arm, trying to drag me out of the main ballroom.

"Wait a minute. You're hurting me." I managed to yank my arm free, backing away by a few feet, darting my eyes back and forth. "What is wrong with you?"

He advanced, the look in his eyes almost unrecognizable. "Now, you listen to me. When I tell you it's time to leave, you will follow my order." As people approached, he darted a single look then sighed as if in relief he wasn't recognized.

"Bullshit. You don't own me. Tell me what is going on."

The memory was one I'd obviously blocked out. We had left shortly thereafter, but mostly because I'd been disgusted with his behavior. That had been the first night I'd seen another side of him. Our relationship had slowly started to crumble after that. As I thought about his reaction, I realized someone had arrived at the soirée that he didn't want to run into.

Still thinking about it, I pressed my hands against Alessandro's shirt, sliding my fingers to the knot in his tie. I darted my eyes to his as I smoothed it, taking a few seconds to drink in his rugged, musky fragrance that reminded me of sin. "You don't look so bad yourself."

“Is something wrong, my kitten? You look pensive. Are you concerned about the pictures?”

“No! Yes. Maybe,” I said, half laughing. “It’s not that.”

He pinched my chin with his thumb and forefinger. “Then what is it?”

“Nothing really.”

“Hmmm... You wouldn’t be keeping something from me, now, would you?”

“Why would I do that?”

“Good, because if you are, I might find the need to take off my belt.”

I trembled on purpose, purring for emphasis.

His laugh was more generous than usual. “Are you ready for tonight?”

“I have a feeling you have something else in mind than just the photographs.”

“You know me too well, *mi dulce gatita*.”

“I think I do.”

“Hmmm... I guess we shall see. I have something for you. If this isn’t what you like, we can exchange it, but it’s necessary for the pictures.”

I watched as Alessandro pulled a small velvet box from his jacket, his face as pensive as he’d commented that mine had been. I’d always wondered how I’d feel when and if a man asked me to marry him. With Tristen, nothing was traditional. He’d merely said the words over a margarita. “I think it would be a good idea if we got married.” That had been it. There’d been no ring, at least at first. He’d waited until I said something to the effect of ‘okay’ then asked for menus.

And I’d thought nothing of it.

Until now.

I’d pictured the moment a man popped the question in my head, the breathtaking few seconds that would turn into a

lifetime. In my mind, there would be the soft strains of guitar music in the background, a bottle of champagne already cracked open. The fire resonating between us would be electric and when he touched me, brushing his fingers down my arm before lifting my hand, flames would singe my skin.

What I hadn't imagined was accepting a huge diamond from a man I barely knew for an unscrupulous reason that I'd agreed to. I stared at the diamond encased in rubies and fought the tears already forming in my eyes. No, this was no fairytale, but the moment of falling into a dark abyss. And even though I'd sold my soul to the devil, I tingled all over. What kind of person did that make me?

"My birthstone," I whispered for no other reason than I didn't know what to say or how to react.

"Rubies?"

"Yes. I was born on July twenty-third. That's why I'm a rebellious kitten. A true Leo."

When he didn't respond, I lifted my head, searching his eyes. If I didn't know better, I'd say they were misted from emotion. That wasn't him. A soulless man could only feel one thing.

Rage.

As he removed the ring, I automatically held out my hand. I'd pretend to be madly in love, our passion delicate strands of gold continuing to grow, weaving a complex pattern around both our bodies, making us one. I'd smile for the cameras, my eyes as light as the brightest stars, beaming with the joy of our coupling.

But as he slipped the ring onto my finger, something magical happened I wasn't expecting.

Fire and ice turned into intense electricity soaring through every cell and muscle, stealing my breath.

Was this just pretend?

He pulled away, taking me by the hand just as Matteo walked into the room.

"Anytime you're ready, boss."

I threw Matteo a look, noticing the glint in his eyes. It would seem that Alessandro's Capo was thrilled that his boss appeared happy. I only hoped it wasn't short lived.

"We are ready." Alessandro led me outside and into the back of the SUV, a driver already in position.

Alessandro and Matteo spoke for a full minute before climbing inside. Both were carrying weapons, as they had been since our arrival. While the short meeting with the FBI agents had been unnerving, at least to me, Alessandro couldn't have cared less about their subtle inquisition.

"Where are we going?" I asked after a few minutes had passed.

"Money has its benefits," Alessandro answered.

I shook my head, uncertain of what to say to him. He'd promised a lovely evening while I'd continued to fret, realizing I hadn't told Clarice or Dierdre about my upcoming nuptials. I'd been allowed to speak to a wedding planner; the surreal moment had created several waves of nausea. I'd been escorted to a bridal shop, told to select whatever dress I wanted with no concern about the cost.

At this point, I couldn't remember what I'd selected, and I reminded myself that it was all just a game. There would be guests at the event, maybe two hundred people I didn't know, and I was supposed to pretend I was happy about spending the rest of my life with him. The flurry of butterflies in my stomach was further affirmation I wasn't entirely certain how I felt.

Several minutes passed and I knew we were headed into the city. When I finally tilted my head, studying the man who infused every night with delicious moments of passion, I shivered. His jaw was set, his eyes staring blankly at nothing, but I could tell his mind was processing how he wanted the game to proceed.

Seconds later, he surprised me by pulling me into his lap. The move felt oddly protective, yet strangely too possessive for me

to handle on this night. I tried to push away but he grabbed me around the waist, preventing me from slipping off.

“Let me go, Alessandro.” I pushed my palms against his chest.

“You know I can never do that.” He stroked the side of my face with the tip of his index finger, swirling in aimless circles as he shifted his gaze once more outside the glass. “You are far too special to allow to slip away.”

What he said felt less like an admission of desire than it did a reminder of something he’d experienced in the past. “Who was she?”

He snorted after a few seconds, barely shifting his gaze in my direction. “Nobody, at least according to my father. Just a method to piss off a powerful man.”

I remained silent, realizing my fingers were now caressing his chest through the crisp white shirt.

“She was the daughter of a man who worked for my father. I was an impetuous young man with the usual teenager libido. For a little while, we enjoyed each other’s company. Until my father found out. Less than twelve hours later, she was sent away to school in another state.”

“Your father did that?”

“My father controlled everything at all times. She was nothing but hired help, beneath me.”

“What did you do?”

Alessandro gripped my throat, his muscles tensing. As he squeezed, a hint of fear drifted through me. While I knew he wouldn’t hurt me, the raw emotions he was going through from dredging up the ugliness of his past had lured him into an entirely different level of darkness.

“I told my father to fuck off and that I was going to bring her back. My father didn’t allow anyone to challenge him, including his own sons. That put the first rift between us.”

“You didn’t find her?”

“Not at first. I was recovering from his beating for over a week.”

“What?” Horror swept through me. “That’s terrible. Your mother didn’t stop it?”

He laughed, the sound as bitter as I’d ever heard. “My mother was no fool. She obeyed him.”

Just like you want me to do.

The thought nearly ravaged my brain. Was it true, like father, like son?

“I’m so sorry.”

“There’s nothing for you to be sorry about, *gatita*. It was the old way where families suffered as much as the soldiers and employees.” He had a faraway look in his eyes. “I did speak with her years later, but she’d moved on with her life. She was engaged to be married to a man she said she loved with all her heart. Even as soulless as I can be, Sierra, I refused to take her away from her life.” He slowly turned his head. “Which is exactly what I’m doing to you.”

There were moments in life that changed the future, some powerful enough that they helped us forget the past. This was one of those moments. For better, for worse, I wasn’t certain I could walk away from him.

He squeezed even harder, and the feeling of suffocation was strong enough I whimpered. Then he exhaled, releasing his hold, gently caressing the areas where his fingers had been.

“You forced me to enter into the contract,” I told him.

“Did I? Ask yourself if that’s really the truth.”

I thought about what he was saying and closed my eyes. He knew me far too well. “You’re right.”

“My sweet *gatita*, you were a fool. I will only destroy you. That’s what my family does. We bury politicians in threats, forcing them to comply with terms that can’t be ignored. Then we punish them for success, ultimately stripping away portions of their lives in order to take full control of them like puppets. My father learned to be the perfect puppet master, my

grandfather a masterful teacher. When I was younger, everyone said I was exactly like my father both in appearance and attitude. It was something I loved to hear, puffing up even as a little kid, doing everything I could to emulate the powerful man.”

When he took a breath, I bit my lip to keep from saying anything. What a horrible life.

“As I got older, I realized that he was evil personified, enjoying every minute of acting on revenge for no other reason than to get his jollies. I watched him in action dozens of times, turning leaders into sniveling boys begging not to be punished any longer. I’ve watched as he paraded around with his whores, acting as if it was his God-given right to treat women like useless pieces of erotic flesh. I’ll never forget the day I was summoned to his office, forced to watch as he tossed a buxom blonde over his desk, ripping off her panties and fucking her as he talked to me about the way to handle a woman.” He stopped, laughing softly to himself, the memories alive and vibrant in his mind.

Why was he telling me this?

My breath skipped as he rubbed his hand across his jaw, tapping his thumb on his cheek. “I’d made fun of him to Cruz and to everybody who would hear me, but they never acknowledged or agreed. They knew better. They were terrified of the man’s wrath.”

“From what you just told me, you’re not like your father,” I finally said.

“You’re wrong, *gatita*. I realized that the moment I walked into the room, my breath caught in my throat from the sight of you. Isn’t it strange that it took over thirty years for me to see the truth that’s been right in front of my eyes the entire time? I’m a carbon copy of my father, which is exactly what he intended.”

I cupped his cheek, forcing him to turn his head so he could look into my eyes. He seemed surprised at my forcefulness, his nostrils flaring as he stared at me. “If you really believe that’s the truth then you should do everything in your power to

change it now. Not tomorrow. Not the next day, but right now. You have the power and the means, all the money in the world, but only you can make the choice to live your life a different way.”

“Do you have faith in me, trust?”

His question was something I was just as terrified to answer, but it came more easily than I’d expected. “Yes.”

The change in his eyes was immediate, his chest puffing up like he’d described before, but for an entirely different reason.

“I want you,” he growled.

“What are you saying?”

“I mean right now. I’m going to fuck you right here. Right now.”

A flush of embarrassment and humiliation roared through me until he shifted me on his lap, forcing me to straddle his legs. The second he pulled me down against his trousers, the feel of his thick cock pressing against the thin lace of my panties sent a shower of shockwaves through me.

“I need to be inside of you.” His command floated into my ears, pulling at every fringe of hunger and need I had for the man. He fisted my hair, likely destroying the beautiful wave of curls I’d taken a full hour to achieve, but at that moment I couldn’t care less. Nothing mattered but the heated touch of his fingers.

Using my hair as a harness, he yanked, exposing the vulnerability of my neck. When he lowered his head, licking around my rapid pulse, my heart fluttered. He sank his teeth into my skin, taking his time to swirl his tongue back and forth.

Panting, I eased my hand down his chest as stars floated in front of my eyes.

“What do you want, *gatita*?” I obviously didn’t answer him fast enough, and his hold tightened. “Tell me.”

“I’ve already told you. Everything.”

“Not good enough,” he muttered as he bit my skin a second time, biting and sucking in a way that was certain to leave a bruise. That was what he wanted to happen, a mark of possession. “Tell me exactly what you need.”

He loved toying with me, creating an explosion of red-hot need, forcing me to face the intensity of my longing.

“An orgasm.”

“That’s better.” He brushed the fingers of his other hand across my jaw, singing my skin. There was no way to hide my body’s reaction, a betrayal I’d once hated but now simply expected with every touch, every kiss. “I own you, Sierra. Every inch, every breath you take. Especially your sweet pussy.”

He was right, although I’d yet to admit it to myself.

“Do you crave my cock buried deep inside of you?”

“Yes.”

“Do you long for the strike of my hand, the pain from my belt slicing against your bottom?”

Breathless, at this point my words were almost inaudible. “Yyyeeesss...” He had that kind of effect on me. I ached inside, the longing harboring such intensity I could barely breathe.

“I crave you writhing underneath me, your juices soaking the sheets. Is that what you want?”

“Please. Yes, please.”

“You can be such a good girl.”

My nipples ached, the thin material of my dress shifting across them keeping both fully aroused.

“I need to be inside your tight little pussy.” He bit down again, sucking for several seconds before releasing his hold. The light rushing by highlighted the crazed look in his eyes, the need that had become more than just obsessive.

And for me, the man was a temptation I couldn’t resist.

I slid back against his knees, my fingers shaking as I fumbled with his belt. It was suddenly as if we were in a vacuum. There was no one sitting in the seats in front of us, no fear that we'd be seen by anyone trying to peer in through the dark glass. I wouldn't care if they did. I was consumed with the same desire, desperate to have him inside of me. I yanked the leather strap away, noticing the sly smirk on his face.

He'd used the belt to punish me on two occasions, both of which had left me in a euphoric state, my pussy aching to have him inside of me.

Just like I felt at this moment.

I yanked at his zipper, biting my lower lip to keep from making a single sound, finally freeing his shaft. The second I wrapped my fingers around the base, he exhaled, his hot breath skipping across my skin. I'd never wanted him as much as I did at this moment.

He squeezed his fingers around my hips, lifting me from his lap then jerking the dress out of the way. When he tugged the panties aside, the slight ripping sound brought another shudder into my system.

The second he thrust his fingers inside me, I threw my head back, desperately trying to catch my breath.

"Oh, God." I laughed and shivered, riding his hand as he pumped savagely. My muscles clamped around the thick invasion, drawing him in even deeper. The roar of sensations coursing through me was exaggerated, nurtured by the vibration of the powerful engine.

"I want to fuck you all night long, thrusting my tongue in your tight channel. I need to cover you with cum, *gatita*, staining your beautiful skin for all the world to see."

Every word he whispered sizzled my senses. I dropped my head as I eased his cock between my legs, sliding the tip up and down my slickened folds.

"You're so hard," I muttered.

"Don't tease me too long."

“What if I do?”

“Then I’ll strip you naked for our photos.”

“You wouldn’t dare,” I huffed as I rolled my fingers up and down his shaft, twisting my hand until he growled from the increased friction.

He lifted his head, brushing his lips across mine, his answer accentuating the sinful moment. “Do you really want to risk that, my kitten?”

“Maybe I’ve learned to love playing with fire.”

Alessandro laughed then yanked my hand away before lifting his hips, driving several inches of his cock inside. “You’ve met your match, my sweet, and you know it.”

“Oh…” I pressed my palm against his cheek, easing onto my knees until the tip was just inside. When he jerked me down again, I dragged my tongue across the seam of his mouth. “Maybe you have.”

I’d always wanted the partner in my life to crave the same kind of passion that I did. This man, this dangerous, incredible hulking mass of a man had awakened the woman inside, sharing his darkest side. He’d made me hunger for what I shouldn’t want, yet my cravings only continued to escalate.

As I bucked against him, I taunted him further, teasing his mouth with my tongue, sliding it back and forth. His breathing remained ragged, his fingers digging into my skin. He continued swelling inside, filling me completely. Lights from the big city floated in through the windows, creating a cascading effect of luminescent shimmers chasing his silhouette as he kept his eyes locked on mine.

“You’re a bad girl,” he whispered. “*Una chica traviesa que necesita un castigo estricto.*”

“What did you say?” I was already breathless, my heart racing as I rolled up and down on his massive cock.

“That you’re a naughty girl who needs a strict punishment.”

“And you think you’re the man to give it to me?”

“You know I am. The only man capable of handling your needs, your unbridled desires.”

“Mmm... Show me.”

He took full control, pulling me up and down in a smooth and easy rhythm. When he captured my mouth, everything drifted into slow motion. Everything about him was mesmerizing, awakening the most beautiful sensations. He swept his tongue inside, gently rolling it against mine.

At least at first.

But the beast inside of him desired more, finally taking over after only a few minutes. As his actions became rougher, the kiss filled with fervent needs, I realized I'd never been happier in my life. He dominated my tongue, rocking me hard against him as he continuously lifted his hips to meet every brutal thrust.

Breathless, I pushed away from him, pressing my forehead against his as I kneaded his chest through his shirt. I closed my eyes, allowing the flutter of vibrations to take me toward a moment of utter bliss.

“Come for me, my kitten. I need to feel your eruption.”

I licked my lips, rocking forward and backward, my body tingling all over. I clenched my muscles, enjoying his guttural sounds. As he pulled me forward, wrapping one hand around the back of my neck, holding me in place as he nipped and licked my earlobe, I couldn't hold back any longer. A powerful orgasm jetted into my system, creating a firestorm of heat.

“Oh. Oh. Oh!”

“That's it, baby. Take all you want.”

The climax hit me long and hard, keeping me aloft in a sea of beautiful clouds for what seemed like an hour, although I knew better. When I finally lowered my head, the first thing I noticed was the incredible glimmer in his eyes.

“You're so beautiful,” he whispered.

I bit my lip, slowly lifting my hips then easing them down. He didn't fight me or try to regain control. This time, he allowed me to take over. I enjoyed watching him, studying his facial expressions as he let go, allowing himself to enjoy the moment. It rarely happened. He was all business, but at night everything was different. He became another man, one full of primal needs, forgetting about the world around him.

As his breathing became irregular, I took a deep breath, holding it in until the moment of his erupting deep inside. Then I blew across his face, savoring every moment of his husky growls as he filled me with his seed.

This was nothing more than a beautiful fantasy, but hope had started to slide into every thought, wishful thinking for a future together.

I'd never hoped to find Prince Charming in a world where chivalry had become an impossibility to find. Yet in discovering the man hidden inside the darkness, I realized I no longer needed the light.

As long as he was by my side.

* * *

Moonlight.

I'd never experienced a full moon in such an incredible way, and I felt almost able to reach through the crystal-clear panes of glass and grasp it with my fingers. Alessandro had teased he'd tie a lasso around it, snagging it for my dreams. The pictures had been taken inside an incredible restaurant located on the top floor of an all-glass skyscraper in the heart of New York.

Stars had filled the night sky along with the luminescent giant orb, providing a playground of hopes and dreams. I'd stood at the window, mesmerized by the glorious sight for several minutes at a time, until the rugged man refused to allow me to ignore him any longer.

We'd laughed and shared a bottle of wine, several glasses of champagne. The photographer had snapped photos of us dancing and enjoying a succulent meal together over the warm glow of a candle. It had been a perfect evening, especially since Alessandro had rented the entire restaurant for his use for the night. I couldn't imagine the cost. And in truth, I didn't care. For once, it was fabulous to pretend like I was a princess.

Sadly, as soon as we'd returned to the house, he'd gone back to work, making several phone calls. I stood in the center of his office after he'd left, drinking in the atmosphere. His scent remained, permeating my skin. I brushed my fingers across the bite mark, stifling a giggle. The photographer had tried to convince me to cover the spot with makeup, but Alessandro had refused.

I turned in a full circle, realizing this was my favorite room in the house. Every piece of furniture and every bookshelf, the dark wood and huge leather chair reminded me of him. Sighing, I pulled off my high heels before heading up the stairs. I never knew how long he'd be, but he always ended up beside me in bed, ravaging me for hours. It was amazing that I wasn't sleepwalking at this point.

After changing, I glanced toward the burner phone Alessandro had purchased. It was late and I hadn't talked with Brittany for three days. I also hoped Clarice had left me a message. She'd been the first person I'd called after Alessandro had given his blessing on making a few short calls. The nagging I'd had regarding the flowers had returned, the dull throbbing combined with the memory I'd had earlier forming a lump in my throat. There were no messages.

Why wouldn't Clarice return my call? That wasn't like her. She'd never been too busy to talk to me, usually forced to calm me down because of some issue. Plus, she should have demanded to know all the sinful details by now. I fingered the screen before dialing her number. It went straight to voicemail as it had three nights before.

"Clarice. I'm getting worried now. Just call me, okay? Even if I don't have my phone with me, there's this little thing called

leaving a message.” I tried to laugh, although the sound was hollow. The butterflies had turned into a sickening feeling.

Something was wrong.

I stared at the screen for a full five seconds then dialed Brittany’s number.

“Hey,” she answered, her scattered voice indicating I’d awakened her. “I was going to call you. I just...”

“What’s wrong? Did something happen at the bistro?”

“No, it’s not that.” Her voice cracked.

“Brittany. You can tell me whatever it is.”

“Clarice.” Now the girl was sobbing.

“What about Clarice? What? What is it?” An icy chill slammed into my system. “Tell. Me.”

“She’s dead.”

CHAPTER 17



*A*lessandro

“He tried to kill me,” Sierra said quietly. Then she lifted her head, blinking away the few tears slipping past her lashes.

The details remained sketchy, the information limited given the late hour and the careful nature of my inquiries, but what I’d learned kept me on edge. I’d placed Matteo in charge of acquiring additional security for the house and grounds, ensuring I wouldn’t have any unwanted visitors. The news of our engagement had yet to hit the presses, but it wouldn’t be long until the final hand was played, drawing Tristen into the light.

Then I’d crush him like a bug.

“Why was Clarice in your house?” I was trying to be sensitive, but the turn of events meant that Sierra had been keeping something from me.

She moved toward the window, staring out at the night sky. Standing in jeans and a tee shirt, her feet bare, she seemed more fragile than the woman who’d been happy to confront the FBI. Her sadness yanked at my heartstrings, which continued to surprise me, but business was business.

The fact she was ignoring me was trying my patience. “You need to tell me the truth, Sierra. That’s the only way I’m going to be able to keep you safe.”

Five seconds passed.

Ten.

“Sierra.”

“She was getting the only box of Tristen’s things that I’d kept. What am I saying? They were the only items I found after his death. Just looking into the box was a stark and clear reminder that our relationship was plastic.”

“What else? I know you’re not telling me something. What was inside?” I moved closer, giving her a stern look.

“A few clothing items and personal effects including a paperback book.”

“A paperback. Was he an avid reader?”

She folded her arms then tilted her head, searching my eyes as she’d done before. What was she hoping to find? Comfort? Condolences? “No. Tristen purposely left it on the nightstand the day he left, which was very unusual. I’d never seen him read a book of fiction in his life. That was the last day he was alive.”

“What was inside the book, Sierra?”

“Nothing that I noticed. There were no pictures that fell out or a slip of paper nestled inside. I tossed it into a box three or four weeks after his death and didn’t think about it.”

“Then why did you deem it important enough that you asked Clarice to retrieve it?”

Her gaze was cold, emotionless, but I could sense she was barely holding it together. “Because of the roses.”

I thought about what she’d just said and remembered her question from before. “You were sent roses for the goddamn event,” I stated, my muscles tensing. What the fuck was wrong with me? I should have grilled her earlier and made a positive determination she hadn’t spoken with the asshole after he’d died. I wasn’t the kind of man to assume anything. It would appear I’d grown soft around her, the beginnings of our... relationship shoving aside my predictable conscientious nature. Damn it to hell.

“Yes,” she said, nodding several times as she purposely walked away from me. “That’s why I asked you whether or not you sent them. Then I thought my mother might have had them delivered, congratulating me. Until I found the note. Brittany had accidentally thrown the card that came with it into the trash.”

“What did this note say?”

She clenched her jaw, her brow furrowing. “The note was blurred, barely readable, but as soon as I made out a few words, I remembered something Tristen had said, a quote from someone named Kim Harrison. ‘The undead did not love, but they remembered love with a savage loyalty.’ And the roses were covered with thorns.”

“Why the fuck didn’t you tell me about this when we were in North Carolina?” My anger spiked and as I advanced, I noticed the first real look of fear in her eyes. I immediately backed down and away, taking several deep breaths. “Why?” While I softened my tone, the tension between us remained. A flash of her ring caught my attention, the angst in my system increasing.

I’d seen the look in her eyes the moment I’d slipped the band of gold on her finger. I’d felt the increase in excitement, noticing the sparkle in her smile. And goddamn it, I’d experienced the powerful vibrations that had coursed through both of us.

But it wasn’t real.

July. She was freaking born in July. I’d almost laughed except in my mind, I thought about the old wives’ tale my brother believed in and shoved it aside. Bullshit superstition.

Or was fate fucking with me, providing the single chance for the one thing I’d demanded from her?

Salvation.

“Because I barely knew you and certainly couldn’t trust you then. How could I?”

I continued to fume inside, more determined than ever to bring down the bastard. “Anything else?” When there was another

hesitation, I closed my eyes. “Your friend was murdered in cold blood because she appeared a lot like you. You’re in danger, Sierra. I’m not going to sugarcoat the fact. You need to tell me everything.”

“Fine. The reason I had Clarice go to my house to get the box became more imperative when she told me she thought she saw Tristen in town. She’d only met him once, but she had an almost photographic memory, so I believed her.”

Jesus Christ. I was playing the kind of game that had almost gotten her killed. The fury turned to rage, my blood boiling. I couldn’t wait to get my hands on the asshole.

Exhaling, I rubbed my jaw, trying to think about what to say to her. “I’m sorry about your friend. Unfortunately, I can’t allow you to return for the funeral. It’s too dangerous. From what you’ve told me, it sounds like Tristen is determined to take care of loose ends.”

“Take care of. That includes killing the woman he professed to love.” She stared off into the distance for a full minute, processing the events. “You know what’s sad? He never once told me he loved me. He always used ‘me too’ or ‘that’s how I feel’ but never ‘I love you.’ If a man can’t use the words, how could a woman ever consider trusting him?”

When she looked at me for some kind of confirmation, I had none to give at this point. Love wasn’t an easy or acceptable concept in my world, and she was beginning to understand that.

“As I told you before, caring about someone is too dangerous, a weakness that could be used at any time.”

“That’s exactly the way you want your life, isn’t it? Too dangerous. You enjoy the games, the risks, and obviously the torment I’ve seen you go through. You bring the danger to your door every day and it’s as matter of fact as preparing dinner or engaging with friends. That’s not my life, Alessandro. For all the pretending I’ve allowed myself to do over the last few days, enjoying every minute I spent with you, a nagging feeling remained because I knew it wasn’t real. I keep asking myself if I eagerly allowed myself to fall into your

arms, accepting your brutal passion because of my anger for Tristen. I don't know the answer and it scares me almost as much as you do."

"I'm not trying to frighten you."

"No, you're not, but everything about you is terrifying, including what I already feel for you."

I wasn't expecting the beautiful woman to care about me. I hadn't done anything to deserve even a moment of kindness. Fuck. If only I could be the man she needed.

"I need you to find him. If Tristen killed her, then do what's necessary." Her voice was shaking, tears slipping down both cheeks.

When I closed the distance, I expected her to pull away, but she held fast, tilting her head and staring at me with all the defiance she could handle. "That's what I intend on doing."

She darted her eyes back and forth across mine several times. She had a way of looking past the darkness in my eyes to what was underneath. And tonight, I could swear she was looking directly into my soul. "Thank you. I'm going to lie down."

"Is there anything else you need to tell me?"

A slow drift of her gaze toward the floor was followed by a single sob. She pressed her hand across her lips, her breathing shallow. "I think our relationship was a cover that he was afraid would be blown."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because he was afraid of running into someone one night while we were attending a function at a country club."

"What country club?"

"I don't remember."

"Sierra. It may be important. Try."

She closed her eyes, the memory difficult enough she was shaking. "Wakefield something."

I shook my head, unnerved by what she'd just told me. "Wakefield Acres."

"That's it. Very posh and I recognized several powerful North Carolina citizens, including one of the senators."

Bristling, I knew it was no coincidence. "Why were you there?"

"An invitation from one of his clients. That was the first time he'd acted as if anyone knew who I was and that he spent time with me. What does it mean?"

"Maybe nothing."

"Meaning you refuse to tell me."

I moved closer, rubbing my knuckles across her cheek. "Meaning until I find out for certain, there's no need to jump to conclusions. Why don't you go rest? We can talk further about this in the morning, but Sierra, you can't continue to hide anything from me. Nothing."

"Do you think the book is important?"

"I won't know until I get my hands on it, if it's still there."

Sierra exhaled, the weight of the world casting a shadow on her appearance. "He wanted me dead because of what I'd kept. How did he know?"

"Maybe he didn't, Sierra, or perhaps he knew you well enough to realize you'd keep his things. That I can't answer."

Her sudden smile surprised me, but I could tell she was trying to find a rational reason for why the events had shifted to violence. "That means he wanted the one link that was left to him erased."

"I won't lie to you. That's what I believe."

Without saying anything else, she headed toward the door. I watched her walk away, wanting nothing more than to gather her into my arms.

But I wasn't that kind of man.

She stopped before leaving the room, barely turning her head.
“He hurt me.”

“I know, baby, and for that he’ll pay dearly.”

For that alone he’d suffer until he begged me to die. But he wouldn’t be allowed the freedom of choice. He’d learn with exact precision what it meant to go against the firstborn son of Cauldron Montenegro.

As well as the woman the king of the empire loved.

* * *

“I suggest you get off your ass and find out what the fuck happened.” I ended the call, immediately cursing under my breath. Both Cruz and Edwardo remained silent, nursing whiskeys while I was verbally abusing another useless detective who owed the family a tremendous favor. I’d called in more than one during the last four hours.

The girl’s throat had been slit using enough force and rage she was almost decapitated. That wasn’t something I wanted Sierra to hear.

“Fuck.” Wakefield Acres. The Irish frequented the club, using the establishment as their location of choice for wining and dining politicians and wealthy moguls. They’d centered a portion of their business in the location using it as a bridge to other southern cities while the Montenegro Empire mostly remained north of the Mason-Dixon line. That had been my father’s choice, not mine. Perhaps it was time for a change.

“So, she was murdered?” Cruz asked.

“Brutally,” I answered, tossing the phone then walking toward the bar, pouring the tumbler full of the same liquor. I wasn’t in the mood for an argument or bullshit recommendations from either man. After throwing back the glass, consuming almost half of the contents, I paced the floor, trying to figure out why the hell Tristen would attempt to kill his former fiancée.

Clarice looked enough like Sierra they could be sisters. And I doubted it was a random burglar who’d broken inside Sierra’s

house, finding Clarice and killing her. The murder had been calculated. I'd spent the rest of the night going over what I knew, and one thing continued to pop up in my mind, something I hadn't explored or even considered up until now.

There was a chance Tristen had been working undercover the entire time he'd worked for me. If that was the case, his background would have been expunged, replaced with one that I wouldn't have thought twice about.

I had to get my hands on the book, if he hadn't already located it. The odds weren't in my favor. I'd dispatched Butch and Sam to retrieve it, but their flight wouldn't land for a couple hours, and they had to make certain the investigation into the murder wasn't still ongoing.

"This is a bad idea," Edwardo said under his breath.

He had no idea about the girl's murder at this point, but my illustrious attorney didn't care. His only concern was to chastise me for decisions I'd made. That would stop now.

"This is unexpected, but I'll handle it." I could tell my answer pissed him off.

While most people would find it impossible to believe Tristen would return from the dead in order to kill the woman he'd professed to love, I knew better. If he believed his fake life to be threatened, he'd come out swinging, eliminating every possibility for collateral damage without questioning why or caring about his old life.

The message sent through Joseph had struck a chord, shoving the man into a corner. Was it possible someone else was breathing down his neck? I needed the goddamn book Sierra had mentioned in order to determine if I was right about my curious assumptions. Whatever the case, Tristen had been or was a turncoat and always would be.

When I turned around to face them, Edwardo shook his head.

"What do you need to say to me, Edwardo? You're like a dog stuck on a chain, staring at a thick, juicy bone placed just out of his reach," I snarled, my temper already flaring.

“This isn’t the time for making jokes, Alessandro,” he retorted.

“Who said I’m joking?”

He stared at me for a few seconds. “Unbelievable. What the hell are you doing?”

“Trying to hunt down a very large rat. What do you think?” I shifted my attention to Cruz, who seemed amused by the exchange.

“You’re acting ridiculous, Alessandro. You’ve been harboring this need for revenge when it’s been proven to you that Tristen Bradford is rotting in his grave. Then you act on some pretty damn sick fantasy by contacting the dead man’s fiancée. Now, I find out not only did you kidnap her, but you’re planning on marrying her. Do you know how twisted that is? Even for you. My God. You’re getting more like your father every damn day and I had hopes you’d be different after taking the throne. Stop being impetuous. It’s going to get you killed.”

I wasn’t used to wrestling with my feelings. Usually, I reacted in whatever manner I saw fit, but the conversation I’d had with Sierra the night before continued to linger in my mind. The fact she’d kept the information to herself continued to anger me. “I’m nothing like my father, Edwardo. Nothing.”

“You’re not taking this seriously enough and you’ve gone too far by kidnapping her. The prosecutor is chomping at the bit to shove your ass back inside that prison on a charge that will allow him to throw away the key. Do you understand what I’m telling you? I don’t think there’s enough magic in the world to save your ass from serving additional time.”

“I didn’t kidnap her,” I said quietly. I wasn’t interested in explaining the rules of the verbal contract.

Exhaling, he muttered under his breath. “Stop playing games. While you’re concentrating on exhuming a dead man, your enemies are chomping at the bit because they smell blood in the water. The Irish have been breathing down our necks for years. They already have a strong hold on a territory you claimed to want to carve a niche in.”

“The south?” Cruz asked, half laughing. “We have enough to deal with in the north.”

I had intended on shifting further beyond Maryland, eventually planning on investing time and money into taking South Florida prior to my arrest. “It would appear the Irish had some connection to Tristen.”

Cruz laughed. “Let me guess. He was double dipping.”

“I don’t know, but he attended some event at Wakefield Acres in Raleigh several years ago but was fearful of being recognized by an attendee.” I took a gulp of my drink, my thoughts returning to Sierra. She’d remained quiet after our discussion the night before, although she’d gotten little sleep if any. I’d remained in the room, watching her from the shadows, the darkness almost overwhelming me.

Edwardo seemed interested, his eyes lighting up. “A mockery of a southern tradition. How the Irish managed to gain admission considering how southerners feel about the Irish is a true fascinating mystery. Are you aware of the amount of money that flows through the facility?”

“I make it my business to find out what other syndicates are doing, Edwardo, as did my father. This is nothing new.” Yet it was disconcerting.

“Whatever your plans, it’s only a matter of time before you lose this charade and when you do, there’s nothing anyone can do to stop the fall of the Montenegro Empire,” Edwardo stated as if the news would terrify me. “My advice is to stop fixating on Tristen Bradford and concentrate on the growth of the business your father worked so hard to achieve.”

He’d always believed my less than traditional methods of handling business would be the Montenegro Corporation’s ultimate demise.

I noticed Cruz had placed his drink on one of the bookshelves and started clapping. “Bravo, Edwardo. An excellent speech. However, the problem is that I agree with my brother. Tristen is alive and he deserves to pay for his sins.”

The boss of the Irish mafia was a cranky son of a bitch who'd sparred with my father on several occasions. While it was believed his son was in the process of taking over as boss, they'd bided their time, hoping I'd be killed in prison.

"You're both nuts," Edwardo huffed.

"I guess we shall see," I countered as I lifted my glass in respect to my brother.

Edwardo grabbed his briefcase, yanking out his paper copy of the *New York Times*, flipping to the article and four photographs encapsulating the story of my recent engagement. "Your plan of finding out if you're correct by destroying a woman who had no knowledge of her fiancé's alternate life? That's beneath even you, Alessandro. My God. What is wrong with you?"

I slammed the glass on my desk before taking long strides in his direction, my rage off the charts. "What is wrong with me? I spent several years languishing in prison because you didn't do your job with regard to Mr. Bradford."

"You're blaming me?" Edwardo demanded. "From what I remember, hiring and firing has been your responsibility because of your demands for eight years now. You should have vetted him more carefully."

I closed my eyes, seething from his arrogance and lack of respect. "Let me lay this out for you. A woman named Clarice Montgomery was murdered inside Sierra's house two nights ago. Her throat was slit. At least that's what I've been able to find out from one of our sources."

"What does that matter?" Edwardo asked.

"She was a friend of Sierra's," Cruz answered.

Edwardo glared at me. "So what?"

"So she was a dead ringer for Sierra, and it's my belief my lovely fiancée was the actual target."

"Whew." Cruz grabbed his drink. "This is getting interesting."

"Perhaps more than you know." I glanced from one to the other, settling my full attention on Edwardo. "We can spar

about why we didn't figure out Tristen could be a turncoat, but the truth is, we weren't looking in the right place."

"What are you getting at?" Edwardo asked, cocking his head.

I took a swallow of my drink, convinced I was right. Proving it would be difficult if not impossible. Killing him would be dicey as fuck, more so than if he was simply a criminal in WITSEC. "Ask yourself why a dead man's testimony was allowed. Also ask yourself why there wasn't an investigation into his death."

Cruz caught on first, grumbling under his breath. "He was working for the Feds the entire time. What the hell?"

"The signs are there. Possibly the DEA. Whatever arm of the law doesn't matter. If he was, then the reason we haven't been crucified is that the information he collected is missing."

"And you think Ms. Wynters either has kept it for him or isn't aware of its existence." Edwardo finally seemed to understand, although by his expression, he remained skeptical.

"I do," I answered. "Which makes it highly likely her life is in even more danger than I believed it to be." I didn't want to consider the possibility she'd been in touch with him, becoming a part of the problem. My jaw was as tight as my muscles.

"Then it's entirely possible he was in Raleigh to be close to the Irish, pretending to give a damn about Sierra," Cruz offered.

Nodding, I polished off my drink, my grip on the glass firm enough I could crack it easily.

"I don't like this, Alessandro. If you believe that by marrying her you're going to offer her any protection, then you're a fool and I've never taken you as one. If this is for the reason I think it is, that you like her, then I fear you'll take another hard fall. She's expendable, or worse. She could be working alongside him. If Tristen was an undercover agent, the work he handled under the guise of the Montenegro Corporation allowed him the ability to gain some access to several of our enemies as well as learning their practices. Not only is that information valuable to you, but it would be to anyone else attempting to

gain an advantage, especially if you were out of the picture. Whether dead or imprisoned won't matter at that point."

I took a deep breath as I thought about what he said. "Exactly my point, Edwardo, and one I don't take lightly. If the Irish are dead set on gaining territory in the north, then they'll face a war."

"If your timeline is correct, brother, then as of this morning, Tristen will know his attempt at ending her life failed." Cruz walked closer, staring me directly in the eyes.

"True enough. I've already added extra security. My men will be on the lookout."

"I'll dispatch mine as well, although it is undoubted that he's changed his looks."

I laughed. "Trust me. I'll recognize the motherfucker from two hundred fucking yards away. And I assure you that he'll want to get very close."

"What are your plans?" Cruz asked.

"There's one way to determine whether or not I'm right in my hypothesis. I plan on going to the one person who would know if my assumptions are correct."

Cruz caught on quickly enough, shaking his head. "You have balls the size of melons."

"What the fuck are you going to do, Alessandro?" Edwardo demanded.

"I plan on having a frank discussion with the prosecutor."

Edwardo's face paled. "You will end up back in prison if you do that."

"My, my, how you underestimate me. I have some powerful information that will help him understand obeying my command is in his best interests." Matteo had been useful during my incarceration, finding several fascinating details about the prosecutor's private life, ones he wouldn't appreciate being out in the open. Now was the best time to use them.

“You’re insane,” Edwardo said in passing. “I won’t be there to pick up the pieces.” He grabbed his briefcase and walked out, cursing under his breath.

“He can be such an asshole,” Cruz snarled.

“Yeah, I know.”

“Do you think there’s a chance Sierra is working with him?”

The answer was difficult, something I didn’t want to face. I moved toward the bar, refilling my drink. After taking a swig, I rubbed my jaw to ease the ache. “I don’t know, but I will find out.”

I noticed Matteo as he walked in, his expression unreadable. But there was something about his eyes that troubled me. “A problem?”

“A delivery for Ms. Wynters,” he said.

A cold chill drifted down my back. While the various houses I owned weren’t kept secret by any means, the fact something had been sent here for my beloved bride meant the game was heating up. “What is it?”

“Maybe you should come to the entrance foyer,” he suggested.

I glanced at Cruz before making my way toward the front door, unable to keep from laughing. “The fucker just called our bluff.”

Positioned in a cut-crystal vase were at least three dozen roses, all with sharp thorns.

And every one of them black from decay.

CHAPTER 18



*A*lessandro

I caught Sierra staring at the dead roses, picking one from the trash. As I stood watching her as she fingered one of the petals before purposely pricking her finger with the sharp point of a thorn. She was silent, unmoving as blood trickled down her finger.

Sighing, I moved toward the kitchen counter, grabbing a paper towel. She allowed me to wrap her finger, slowly lifting her head. “You were right.”

“I’m going to ask you something and I’ll know if you lie to me. Have you been in contact with Tristen?”

She immediately narrowed her eyes, staring at me as if I’d lost my mind. “No.”

I studied the expression on her face as well as the shimmer in her eyes in my search for the truth. “Then I’ll believe you.”

“Wait a minute,” she said as she jerked her hand away. “Now you think I’m working with him?”

“It’s a remote possibility.”

Her reaction was painful to watch, as if I’d struck her with my fist. “How dare you even think that when you were the one who disrupted my life.” She walked closer once again, jerking off the towel and holding up her finger. “I did this on purpose, not because I love the man but because I wanted a painful

reminder that he'd lied to me. Every day, every phone call was a fucking lie. And do you want to know what's hysterical about this sick game? You haven't lied to me, not really. Other than not telling me who you were at the beginning of this twisted, caustic relationship, you haven't lied. He did over and over again. As I stared at these dead flowers, I told myself that it was okay to hate him and do you know why, I mean other than the obvious reasons?"

"Why, Sierra?"

"Because hating him would allow me to love you. Isn't that insane?" She shook her head, keeping the defiant look in her eyes. Then she walked around me in a wide arc.

Love. What the hell was wrong with her? I would only crush her again and again, just like I already had.

"Sierra. I had to know."

She stopped short, her laugh bitter. "Now you do."

* * *

Food was the spice of life, according to some intellectual. For me, food usually allowed a potential terse meeting to have some common ground. Even the most brutal man had to eat, refusing to waste a good steak, especially when Wagyu beef was being served alongside a robust cabernet.

As I did with all my enemies, I kept tabs on their lives. Where they lived, what they ate, who they considered their friends, and if they had any dark proclivities. All men had at least one secret they preferred to keep hidden in the padlocked box they'd shoved it into.

The prosecutor who'd handled my case was no exception. Crawford James had an excellent reputation, enjoying the perks surrounding his reputable position, including the influence he had over dozens of associates. He also enjoyed spending money.

As I strolled into Gallagher's Steakhouse, bypassing the hostess, I inhaled the sensuous scent of beef and smiled. This

was the very location I'd gone after arriving in town, and I'd enjoyed a blood-rare filet. I suspected Crawford was doing the same, his recent win—a case involving several Russian lowlife scum—adding to his coffers.

And to his clout.

There were three men at the table, including the judge who'd presided over my case. This would seem to be my lucky day. I slid into the fourth seat without saying a word or being noticed, immediately attracting the attention of one of the waiters. "Bring another glass and a third bottle."

"Yes, sir," the waiter said without bothering to glance toward the host of the illustrious event.

Crawford glared at me, his fork remaining in his hand. He slowly lowered it, grabbing his napkin and wiping his mouth before bothering to speak to me. "What do you want, Montenegro?"

"What do I want. That's a loaded question," I said as I sat back in the chair. The judge was none too happy to see me, his face reddening. Only the youngest man at the table, likely a new recruit being wined and dined in order to begin indoctrinating him into accepting the firm's way of life seemed impassive. Perhaps he didn't know who I was. There wasn't a better opportunity than right now.

"Get out before I have you arrested," Crawford hissed.

"For enjoying a glass of wine on a beautiful day?" I might not be a patient man, but I allowed myself to enjoy the moment.

"What is going on?" the judge asked. Winston Parker also had a reputation as a ball buster, and he'd feasted on handing down my sentence. One day he and I would quarrel.

And he would lose.

I waited until the waiter returned, filling the new glass without bothering to touch up the others. The young man knew my reputation as did everyone inside the restaurant. I took very good care of them.

“I won’t belabor the issue, gentlemen. I’m very well aware that Tristen Bradford was working for a branch of the federal government as an undercover officer. I also believe that he was provided with a new identity as promised for his extensive work. I admit that your method of killing him off was extraordinarily exceptional, but utter bullshit.” I waited until my statement made an impact, both Crawford and Winston immediately uncomfortable.

“That’s utter crap,” Crawford hissed.

“Is it?” I took a sip of wine, tipping the glass after swallowing. “Very nice. I’m certain it goes well with your steak.”

“If this is some ridiculous attempt at keeping me from nailing your ass, then you’re dead wrong!” The fact that Crawford smashed his fist on the table, his voice rising by several decibels was a clear indication I was right.

“What I’m expecting is for you to drop the ridiculous case you have on your desk regarding the recent raids. I also expect you to call off the wet-behind-the-ears federal agents. And most important, I expect you to tell me the new location you provided to Mr. Bradford as he and I have some unfinished business.”

Crawford made the mistake of laughing. “You must be mad.”

“I’m many things, Crawford, but mad isn’t one of them. Enraged is something else.” The new kid was eating this up.

The prosecutor returned his attention to his plate. “I have no intention of providing any assistance to feed your insanity. However, I do plan on burying you and your entire family.”

I took another sip, sighing before reaching into my jacket pocket, removing a single envelope. Had I known Winston would be here, I would have prepared a second. As I slid it toward Crawford, he gave me a venomous look.

“What the fuck is this?” he demanded.

“This is photographic proof of the extracurricular activities that you’re involved in.” I waited until he opened the envelope, peering inside. Almost immediately he paled, sucking in his breath. The fact he enjoyed submitting to very

powerful male Doms at a local gay BDSM club mattered given the fact he was married to one of the senator's daughters.

"You son of a bitch. Where did you get these?" he asked, the sound almost muffled.

"I have my sources like you have yours. And Judge, just so you don't feel left out. I'm well aware of your gambling habit, to the tune of hundreds of thousands of dollars. I would assume at minimum you'd be forced to recuse yourself from prosecuting any cases involving illegal gambling." I didn't need to push it any further at this point. They knew exactly what I could and would do.

"What do you want?" Crawford asked as he shoved the envelope into his jacket.

"I already told you." I pulled a business card from my pocket, sliding it in his direction. "I'll give you forty-eight hours to contact me with the information I requested and documentation to show the cases were dropped." I rose from the table, winking at the kid who sat flabbergasted. "Enjoy your lunch, gentlemen. Don't forget you can grab some Tums from the men's lounge in case you get heartburn from tasting so much blood."

As I walked out of the restaurant, I had total confidence that I would hear from Crawford. As far as his dirty little secret? I'd hold onto that for several years to come.

* * *

Sierra

Two days later

Marriage.

I'd always thought my parents had found the kind of fairytale so many little girls dream about and that my father had been her Prince Charming. She'd told me only after I'd turned twenty-one and over drinks that she'd hated my father in the beginning. She'd thought he was an arrogant bastard with a love of only himself and a mirror. It had taken my father three full years to break her down, finally getting her to say yes to coffee. Nothing more. However, over a strong hazelnut brew she'd known he was the one. She'd even mentioned the word 'swooning' more than once.

As I stood in front of the mirror inside the small rectory I'd been allowed to use until the guests arrived, I realized I'd fallen hard for Alessandro over our phone calls, even though I'd refused to admit it given it seemed nuts. And now?

He'd tried to apologize in his own way, leaving me a single daisy on my pillow. At least he knew how much I hated roses. I'd been hurt he'd assumed I was working with Tristen, which was ridiculous.

At least I knew where I stood with Alessandro.

Why did I want more even now?

Tingles drifted all the way down to my toes as I thought about the power of the way he looked at me with his dark eyes, the intensity never failing to completely undo me. With every touch of his hand I quivered, melting from the sound of his deep baritone. I brushed my hand down my neck. The spot where he'd marked me remained tender.

However, he also continued to irritate me, driving me insane with his hardheadedness and refusal to accept that life wasn't about revenge and extreme wealth. Just like my mother had told me, no marriage was perfect.

"This is in name only. Remember?" My voice echoed in the gorgeous facility, the gothic design of the church another reminder that entering into a marriage was supposed to be holy. I rolled my eyes at the thought. Alessandro believed he might burst into flames from walking inside the cathedral. I knew better. Buried under the scarred layers was a man with a huge heart.

Yet I couldn't seem to draw it out of him for longer than a few hours, a day at most.

Exhaling, I took a deep breath as I stepped back, gazing as far down as the size of the mirror would allow.

The dress was exquisite, thousands of hand-sewn beads and jewels bedazzling the bodice and long train. Yet I felt like a fake and nothing more. What if I was condemning Tristen? What if my actions alone would get him killed? I had made a deal. I'd wanted the truth. I prayed to God it wouldn't destroy anyone else that I cared about. Had he really tried to kill me? There were so many questions that remained in my mind, but the worst one had an answer. I've been intimate with someone I didn't even know, a man capable of killing.

As I stared down at the ring, I thought about Clarice. She'd given her life because she cared about me.

The game was getting out of hand. Alessandro remained on edge, the book yet to be found. He'd had his men stay in Raleigh, scouring my house as well as Clarice's in the off chance she'd returned to my place for some unknown reason after storing the book.

He'd been angry, making phone call after phone call, the night before and remaining downstairs. I'd needed the time alone in order to shift into someone other than the girl who'd been thrilled to open a book and wine shop. That seemed so far in the past at this point, as if I'd died and been reincarnated into someone else.

I pressed my hand down the front of the dress, glancing over at the full glass of champagne I'd yet to take a sip from. Alessandro had it smuggled in, one of his men bringing it only twenty minutes before. Other than that, I was and felt entirely alone, no longer emotional about anything I'd gone through.

Although I was nervous, a numbness had settled throughout my mind and body, preventing me from conjuring up the fear and anger, sadness and angst. I could get through today, pretending to be something I wasn't. What then?

I hadn't told my parents that I was getting married. Who did that? Then again, what could I say? *Hey, Mom. I'm getting married to a man I met a couple of weeks ago. The same one who's been stalking me on the phone for months.* That would go over well. I couldn't stand the thought of worrying them. Besides, if the marriage was only for six months, they didn't need to know a thing.

I glanced at the small clock, realizing I still had almost thirty minutes to wait. Maybe a single glass of champagne would calm the anxiety. The stem was heavy, prisms dancing across the cut crystal from the afternoon sun. Alessandro had spared no expense, the reception at a posh establishment, a promise of wicked things to come at the penthouse suite we would retire to later. My handsome Spaniard had done everything in his power to provide the perfect setting, all created with my desires in mind.

He required my forgiveness, so he'd made the moment enchanting.

But it was fake.

Maybe if I continued to remind myself of that I'd start to believe it.

The champagne was scintillating, the bubbles tickling my nose as I walked to one of the windows. Guests I didn't know were arriving, all dressed festively as required by invitations I'd selected in five minutes, the wedding planner running me through a long list of requirements in less than two hours. None of this would have been possible without her.

As I leaned against the aging wooden frame, I felt a presence behind me before I heard slow and deliberate footsteps coming toward me. The bright sun prevented any reflection, but just by the musky scent of sandalwood and spices and by the way my body tingled, I knew the identity of my mystery visitor.

"I've been thinking about you."

The deep baritone was enticing, seductive, and my nipples hardened from the sound alone. I refused to turn around, playing a little game of my own. "Who is this?"

After taking a deep breath, he chuckled, continuing to walk closer. And closer.

A tingling of fire-branded sensations coursed through me, skittering down my spine as my panties dampened.

“An admirer and you are my salvation, *mi dulce gatita*,” he growled, his voice vibrating through every muscle.

“What? I’m no one’s salvation.” I used the same defiance I had from the very first time I’d met him, engaged immediately from the sensual smile he’d given.

“You’re a beautiful woman and you should be cherished. There is much we can do together.”

He remembered exactly what he’d said to me during the first phone call.

“I don’t know who you are, but my fiancé will be very angry if he finds you here.”

“I don’t think you understand,” he whispered as he crowded my space, the heat of his body resonating through me. My heart thumped wildly in my chest, a slight echo beating within. “I’ve finally come for you. Now, you do belong to me.” He brushed his fingers over my naked shoulders, taking his time trailing them down my arms as he lowered his head, pressing kisses against my neck.

“Mmm...” I closed my eyes and as he pressed his groin against me, I moaned. “You’re not supposed to see the bride before she walks down the aisle. It’s considered bad luck.”

“I don’t need luck when I have you, *gatita*. Now, the two of us will create a world of magic.” He bit down on the same spot as he pulled me against him, running his fingers down the cleft of my breasts, slowly shifting them to my stomach.

“Is that what you want, Alessandro?” I pushed my palms against him, lifting my head.

“You study my eyes as if you’ll find the answers you seek. If I had it in my power, I’d give you everything you asked for.”

“There’s only one thing I want.” And he didn’t have the capability of providing it.

While he ignored my comment, dropping his head a second time, I could tell by his expression what I'd said pained him. His response was to slide his finger past the bodice of my dress.

I placed my hand on his, stopping him from going any further. "You don't want to soil the dress. Do you?"

"I couldn't care less about the dress," he murmured then dragged his tongue across the bite. "I'll buy you a thousand dresses. Then I'll rip them off you."

Laughing, I squeezed his hand, savoring the private moment. "Just a thousand?"

"Anything you wanted. Just name it."

"Maybe I'll take the sun."

"Aren't we hot enough for you?" When he backed away, taking the champagne from my hand, I slowly turned to face him.

"There's always room for additional heat, Alessandro." I could tell by the commanding look in his eyes that he had something on his mind. "What are you doing here?"

"There's a custom in my family that must be adhered to."

"Another one? Thank goodness I passed the test for the first one." He'd already told me about the reason behind the rubies adorning my ring. I'd thought the superstition was adorable. He'd thought it ridiculous, but I reminded him that fate always intervened when you least expected it.

"Yes," he said before indulging in a sip of champagne, his eyes never leaving me as he eased the glass to the dressing table. Then he reached for my hairbrush, twirling the wooden handle in his fingers. "You see, the bride to be is spanked prior to the wedding, a gift from her would-be spouse."

"If that's really a custom, the term 'would be' is perfect. You would damage the dress if you tried."

He stalked toward me, his powerful presence more godlike than ever. He had a way of disarming me by his sinful smile and sensual expression.

“My little rebellious kitten. I’ll need to take a firm hand with you at all times. Now, I suggest you pull up your dress and lean over the dresser so I can provide you with what you need. If not...” His eyes kept me breathless.

He certainly didn’t need to finish the sentence.

I pursed my lips, purposely pouting before obeying him, although dragging the dress out of the way was a feat never to be repeated. When he quickly wrapped his finger around the thin strap of my thong, I gasped even before he ripped it from my body.

“What are you doing?”

“I don’t think you need panties. I’ll need complete access to your wet pussy at all times,” he said in his deep, husky voice.

As he pressed his hand against the small of my back, I bit back a whimper. I had no doubt the sound resonated nicely throughout the ancient church.

He didn’t waste any time, bringing the brush down against my backside with several hard swings. The brutal cracking sound matched the whines escaping my mouth.

“Ouch! That really hurts,” I said, shifting back and forth as pain rushed down both legs.

The look he gave me in the mirror was full of heat and desire, a beast far too hungry to waste time. He snapped his wrist six times in rapid succession, agony sweeping through me like a firecracker. As I wiggled back and forth, the dress rustling from my movement, he wagged his finger.

“Be a good girl or tonight I’ll finish your punishment.” He continued the spanking, moving from one side to the other, taking time to cover every inch of real estate. Heat rushed from my bottom all the way to my cheeks as embarrassment settled in. Anyone could walk in at any moment. Perhaps that’s what he wanted.

“Ten more,” he growled as he teased me, rolling the tip of his finger down the crack of my ass, sliding it between my legs. As he flicked it back and forth across my clit, he leaned down,

whispering in my ear, “Tonight I’ll shackle you to the bed and take you in the most vile, demanding manner.”

“Mmmm...”

He laughed then finished the discipline, every strike harder than the one before. When he finished, he gently placed the hairbrush on the vanity before adjusting my dress. Then he pocketed my panties. “Be a good girl. Remember, Matteo is just outside if you need anything or if something occurs.”

“You have the entire church protected like I’m the princess of a foreign land. I don’t think anyone would dare cross you at the wedding.”

Alessandro had told me about his hopeful plan that Tristen would make an appearance at the reception or soon thereafter. The man continued to poke the bear and I feared the outcome now more than ever.

As he backed away, I took several deep breaths, the rush of adrenaline and wildfire coursing through me just as explosive as always.

I peered into the mirror, barely recognizing the woman staring back at me, but it was obvious by the flush creeping up my cheeks and the rosiness of my lips that I’d fallen completely and totally in love with him.

Very slowly, a single tear began to trickle down my cheek.

* * *

Alessandro

“Is she alright?” Cruz asked as soon as I’d joined him in the back of the church. The game had finally gotten on my nerves. In the two days since I’d had a conversation with the prosecutor, I’d yet to receive a phone call. The asshole was running out of time. Even worse, the book had yet to be found, although they were taking one final sweep of Sierra’s house before abandoning the search.

“She’s fine. Nervous but fine,” I answered as I scanned the crowd. Everyone who was anyone was here, pretending they were friends of the family. They were just hoping to witness a train wreck—that the police would charge in, arresting me on the spot.

“I don’t blame her. I don’t see many of your soldiers here.”

I laughed. “They’re hiding in plain sight.”

Cruz chuckled with me. “You’re far too clever for your own good. You don’t think she’s involved?”

Exhaling, I fisted my hands. The thought remained difficult for me to swallow. “I don’t. She has too much anger inside of her. Besides, I already know her well enough to be able to tell when she’s lying.”

“I’m glad to hear you say that; however, I don’t mind telling you. I have a bad feeling about this.”

Sighing, I checked my phone for the tenth time. “He’ll show.”

“That’s what I’m worried about.” As he tilted his head, I could tell he was being genuine. “We have a little more than five minutes to go. You’re really going through with this?”

His question was rhetorical but before I answered, a vision of her face entered my mind. I wanted nothing more than to follow through with my promise, introducing her to the darker side of passion.

“Whoa. You really like this girl,” he teased.

“She’s...”

“Yeah, I already heard. She’s special. I think you love her.”

I still couldn’t answer.

He patted me on the back. “Brother. If that’s the case, then you need to tell her. If not, she’ll keep her end of the bargain then bolt. In my opinion, she deserves someone better than a broken-down old man.” He backed away, laughing loud enough several people glanced in our direction.

“To hell with you.”

“I’m serious, at least about the possibility you’ll lose her. If that’s what you really want, then keep going like you are, lying to yourself. It seems easy for you.”

Fortunately, my phone rang before I had a chance to say something I might regret. I walked outside before answering. “I hope this means good news.”

“We found the book. I’m not sure what the hell you think is inside. It’s just a damn book, but got it for you,” Butch said.

“Whatever you do, don’t let it out of your sight. Take the next flight out.”

“We’re on our way to the airport.”

I ended the call, taking a deep breath. At least I might discover several answers. Just before I pocketed my phone, it rang again, the call from a number I didn’t recognize.

But my instinct told me the identity of the caller. “You waited until the last minute, Crawford. That doesn’t bode well for our continuing relationship.”

“Cut the crap, Alessandro. I have the information you provided, but it comes with a guarantee that you will not release those photographs.” Crawford was obviously agitated.

Smirking, I scanned the parking lot as several additional people moved toward the church’s main entrance. I’d selected the cathedral to ensure that Sierra would be protected. I had men located in every corner of the property, Matteo within steps of her location. Still, I’d grown weary of the game. “As long as you follow through with your end of the deal, the pictures will remain out of the public eye. Where the fuck is the bastard?”

“He’s dead. He died in the fiery car, but it wasn’t an accident. Tristen Bradford was murdered.”

CHAPTER 19



*S*ierra

One glass of champagne turned into two. The bubbles hadn't eased the butterflies. I wasn't certain anything could. I'd returned to the window, making my peace with what I'd chosen to do. I'd walk down the aisle with a man I loved, but who could never love me. Then in time, I'd return to my normal life.

Although I wasn't certain anything would ever be normal again.

I heard the door and took a deep breath as Alessandro advanced. We were walking down the aisle together. At least it wouldn't seem as odd a behavior to the two hundred or so guests. I found myself taking several additional breaths, almost panicking. "It's time. I know. I'm ready."

As I'd experienced so many times over the last two weeks, prickling sensations swept through me. Only this time, hair stood up on the back of my neck.

Because of panic.

"Hello, Sierra. It's good to finally meet you."

The words were far too similar to the ones Alessandro had used, the voice almost as dark but instead of being laced with a sensual tone, there was nothing but pure evil in the stranger's pitch. And even more terrifying, it resonated just like Tristen's.

As I turned around, I realized he'd moved to within two feet, the sunlight glinting off a large, jagged-edged knife.

And I didn't recognize him.

"Who are you?"

I noticed his hand was bandaged, blood seeping through the white gauze. He was missing at least two fingers. Who the hell was this? As soon as I opened my mouth again, he came to within a few inches of me.

"Do not scream, Sierra. I would hate to cut out your pretty little tongue while we're just getting to know each other." He was amused by my terrified reaction, raking his gaze all the way down, slowly lifting it to my eyes.

I shifted away from him only to have him make a tsking sound.

"Stay right where you are. We're going to have a long chat. It would seem you have a double. What a pity I hadn't noticed before."

Anger swept through me, vile, evil thoughts.

"You killed her. You bastard!" My words infuriated him and within seconds, he managed to grab me around the neck, yanking me against his chest, the knifepoint placed against my jugular.

"I'd be careful about making me angry," he hissed. "I can see why Tristen liked you."

I remained quiet, taking shallow breaths.

"Yes, he spoke of you only once, although he refused to tell me your name. That made me curious, so I followed him all the way to Raleigh on one of his excursions. I watched from a distance as he played house. Did you know he used you as a cover while in Raleigh? That allowed him access to a very fancy club where he pretended to be somebody he wasn't."

None of this was making any sense.

"What I found interesting was that he actually loved you. That's why he left you a small fortune he thought no one

would know about. He also left an item that now belongs to me.”

The fucking book. Why the hell was it so important? “What are you talking about? Other than some money, he left a few clothes and a toothbrush.”

“Now, now. Lies are beneath you. Why don’t you be a good girl and I might allow you to live to walk down the aisle with a monster. Or will you change your mind?”

“Where is Tristen?”

He laughed as he gave me another heated gaze, this time filled with lust. I was repulsed, confused. Where the hell was Matteo?

The moment I glanced toward the door, he exhaled. “If you’re looking for your bodyguard, don’t bother. He’s lying in a pool of blood.”

Oh, God. Alessandro had to walk in at any moment.

“You’re a fucking monster,” I said, making my voice as loud as possible. Would anyone hear me through the thick wooden doors?

“Your fiancé made me that way. I should say your former fiancé.”

The man was talking in riddles that I couldn’t understand.

“I’ll ask you again. Who the hell are you? What do you want?”

“His name is Joseph Sampson. He was Tristen’s partner at the law firm. He’s also the man who killed Tristen and made it look like an accident,” Alessandro said as he took long strides into the rectory, a weapon planted firmly in his hand.

While a few seconds of relief flooded through me at hearing his voice, it was short lived as I realized what he’d said. Tristen was really dead.

“Why?” I managed.

“Would you like to explain how you found out that Tristen was an FBI agent who’d been working undercover for several years in an attempt to bring down both the O’Hare syndicate

as well as the Montenegro family?” Alessandro moved closer, pointing the weapon at Joseph’s head.

Joseph laughed, the sound just as dangerous as his speaking voice. “He was a fucking traitor to both of us. I did the world we live in a favor by injecting him with a very special compound of narcotics. Everyone believes it was an accident.”

Alessandro’s brother moved closer, shifting to the other side. Joseph immediately tightened his hold, the blade piercing my skin. As a trickle of blood oozed from the slight wound, I could tell that’s all my dark stranger could concentrate on, his anger building to uncontrollable rage.

“Then you win the clever boy of the year award. Tell me something, Mr. Sampson. Are you looking for the information Tristen stole?” Alessandro asked in a calm voice, taking another step closer. I watched his every move, my heart racing.

“Don’t fuck with me, Montenegro. If you have it, then I suggest you hand it over or your lovely fiancée will die right here in the middle of this holy place.” Joseph’s hold grew tighter.

“You’re in no position to make a deal.” Alessandro laughed. “I think I’ll give Shaun O’Hare a call and let him know where you’re located. I’m sure you’re aware there’s a significant price on your head.”

“Fuck you, Montenegro. You’ll rot in prison.” Joseph increased the pressure and I whimpered, drawing Alessandro’s attention.

“Let her go,” he insisted.

“Only if you have the book. You played a game with me, you fuck. I’ve lost enough already because of you and your kind.” Joseph lifted his bandaged hand.

“Had I known, I assure you that you wouldn’t be able to hold a weapon for the rest of your life.”

Cruz inched closer, the action forcing Joseph to jerk me away by several inches.

“She dies right now.”

“Be careful what you say to me.” As Alessandro started to lower his weapon, I knew exactly what he was doing, attempting to allow Joseph to believe he cared about me more than exacting an entirely different level of revenge.

As soon as he did, I stopped playing the victim, smashing my foot into Joseph’s. Everything happened quickly, Joseph losing his grip just enough I broke free, but only for a split second. As Joseph plunged the knife toward me, all I could do was scream.

Pop! Pop!

* * *

Alessandro

Five days later

“How’s Matteo?”

I looked up from my laptop, exhaustion taking a strong hold that had yet to abate. Cruz had been valuable over the last few days, both of us navigating the murky waters of law enforcement versus continuing with the plan to place a noose around the Irish clan’s neck. If I wasn’t careful, blood would paint the streets of New York, something even I wanted to avoid. That wouldn’t bode well for maintaining a strong hold on some very powerful, supposedly law-abiding citizens.

What Tristen had amassed over his four years of employment with my organization could light a fire in a half dozen cities. In my opinion, and one that would never leave my house, the man had been the best operative I’d known my entire career. Even my father had been impressed with what he’d managed to glean. Documents. Financials. Recorded phone calls. Photographs. They’d all been represented, locked in a massive self-deposit box he’d meticulously hidden away from prying eyes. The fucking fiction book, a Clive Cussler novel no less,

had been the sole indicator of where to locate the small bank in Bumfuck North Carolina. Deciphering the code he'd used had taken several well-paid hackers to figure it out.

I'd only gotten my hands on the contents of the box the night before. Sorting through the incredible volume would take time.

"Recovering. He could have limited use of one arm, but he's lucky to be alive." I was grateful for what he'd done, his ability to fight Joseph's attack allowing me enough time to realize what the fuck was happening.

Even though I still found it impossible to believe. The nagging remained.

Joseph had believed the information had died with Tristen until I'd made an appearance in Raleigh. He was smart enough to know the O'Hares would soon learn he'd made several mistakes that could cost their organization millions of dollars as well as be forced to deal with several indictments.

"From what I heard, he fought Joseph valiantly." Cruz walked closer, eyeing the jump drives and file folders I'd been searching through for the last four hours. "You need to get some rest."

"We have a goldmine in our hands, brother. I don't plan on letting this out of my sight for the rest of my life."

He laughed as he shook his head. "Same tenacious asshole."

"You?" I teased.

"No, you. You have a woman upstairs who hasn't managed to put the past behind her, and you sit here like a damn soldier trying to rule the world."

I sat back, grabbing my watered-down drink. It was only eleven in the morning, but at this point time no longer mattered, one hour melding into a full day. I was determined to break down the information.

Then the sting would begin, one the FBI, the DEA, and almost every other law enforcement agency had hoped to achieve.

They still had no idea the safety deposit box had been recovered.

“Which territory would you like?”

“Come on, Alessandro. Your almost bride had blood covering her beautiful dress, was almost killed, and I doubt you’ve spent more than a few hours with her. Am I right?”

I drummed my fingers on the desk, remembering the clear image of her face the moment I’d gathered her into my arms, crushing her against my chest as I told her she was safe. Her words? That she’d never feel safe again because monsters did exist. Little did Cruz know I’d watched over her every night, remaining in the chair beside her bed, allowing the darkness to provide me with some comfort while she’d wallowed in misery. The truth was I had no clue what to say to her.

“She’s free to return to her life. I’m striking a check for her payment later today.” I realized there was no emotion in my tone. None.

He slammed his hands on my desk, his gaze drilling into me. “Is that what you really want? Is all the money and power in the world enough to soothe the demons living inside of you?”

“It’ll be a good start.”

My brother backed away as if I’d just set him on fire, but his eyes remained blazing with an entirely different kind of passion than I’d ever experienced.

He had a lust for life.

I had one for blood.

Or was I fooling myself?

“When I was painting, I found utter joy that I believed no one could ever take away from me. No one. Because it was personal, allowing all the ugliness of who and what I’d been born into to shiver in the corner while my aspirations and dreams took hold. When our father stole it from me, acting as if I was nothing but a useless piece of flesh that had been born into our world, I believed him for years. Years. I tried to be a good soldier, learning the art of shedding blood, but it never

brought me anything but a bad taste in my mouth. I believe you're the same way."

"Don't fool yourself."

His laugh was bitter, full of anger from everything he'd been through. "This," he said as he swept his arm around the room, "is bullshit. Fake. It could be taken away at any time without notice or provocation. Does money buy happiness? If I'm any example to you whatsoever, I can tell you easily that it didn't. I substituted boats and cars, every flavor of woman I could find. Nothing made me happy."

"And what the fuck are you doing about it?"

He reared back as if I'd insulted him. "I'm painting again and for the first time since I was a damn kid, I look forward to getting out of bed every morning."

I hadn't known. Why hadn't he told me?

Because you act like you don't give a damn about family.

"That's amazing," I said, thrilled that he was doing what he loved again.

"Really? Aren't you going to admonish me, or simply remind me that I have duty and honor to the family?"

"No."

His eyes opened wide. "Then you just affirmed that I've been right about you and always was. I looked up to you, brother, because you challenged the system. You wanted to make it better for everyone, not just yourself. And believe it or not, that woman upstairs is your salvation, the single thing in your life that's brought you happiness. Luckily, she's flesh and blood, warmth and gentleness. You love her. One piece of advice. If you can't return that love, at least be honest with her, but if you lie to yourself in order to do that, you'll regret it for the rest of your life. The fork in the road is right in front of you. Choose wisely."

The air in the room seemed to be sucked out as I processed his words. Without saying anything else, he walked out, leaving

me with tangible ways of making billions of dollars while crushing a solid portion of our enemies.

But he was right.

I was fucking miserable.

After a few seconds, I rose to my feet, staring down at the priceless information. Then I raked my arm across my desk, pitching everything including my laptop to the floor. Nothing mattered any longer. Not a damn thing.

Except for the beautiful woman I'd stalked, seduced, and captured.

I couldn't lose her. I just... couldn't.

* * *

Sierra

Waves crashed against the shore, not in the gentle manner they'd been doing, but savagely, as if angry with the world. The turbulent ocean matched the way I felt, enraged. Furious.

Anger continuously swelled through me like a fire raging out of control and I could do nothing about it. My tumultuous state of emotions had little to do with the events at the church, although I'd been terrified, almost paralyzed with fear until Alessandro had taken me into his arms. He'd held me for what had seemed like hours, his warmth and strength pulling me out of a horrible abyss.

He'd allowed me to process everything that occurred, never chastising me when tears had fallen. But that had only lasted a day. Then he'd disappeared into his world, planning to crucify his enemies. I'd overheard enough to know he'd found the book in the bushes in front of my house, the item carelessly tossed by Joseph in his effort to locate what Tristen had amassed during his time serving undercover.

I'd learned how Tristen had graduated law school, initially intending on becoming an international lawyer. Then he'd

been approached by the FBI to join ranks. The undercover sting operation had been the most complex the FBI had devised in at least a full decade. The other details Alessandro had filled in, including the oddity with regard to Tristen and Joseph partnering in a firm, supposedly representing two opposing teams. Teams. Brutal killing organizations.

Poor Joseph had no idea what he'd been lured into, allowing Tristen to garner information about the Irish mafia as well as the Montenegro syndicate. I would never know the full reason why he'd targeted me to become his fake fiancée, other than he needed an entirely different type of cover.

That alone added to my anger, but at least the guilt and emotional swings about what I'd thought was a relationship were starting to fade. In their place was nothing but numbness.

That was because I ached with need for the passion I'd shared with Alessandro.

Nothing came close to the range of emotions and joy, the incredible sensations I'd experienced every time I'd been with him. Now the game was over. If I had to guess, I'd say within a day or two, I'd be flown back home first class, my million dollars in hand and barely two words of acknowledgement prior to Alessandro walking away from my life.

I wanted to beat him to a bloody pulp, but why bother? He. Didn't. Care.

A trickling trail of sensations skittered through me, only this time not from fear but from excitement. I had to shut it down. I couldn't allow myself to get hurt any more than I had.

“My mother once told me that the best thing I could do for myself was to find something of my own, a niche that no one else could touch or take away.”

I held my breath as I heard Alessandro's voice behind me, fearful of turning around. I didn't want to cry anymore.

He took two footsteps inside, then halted. “Cruz managed to do that. He's finally decided to paint again. I'm proud of him for not allowing our father to win.”

I said nothing.

“I watched as our father stripped his passion away and it carved a hole in my heart as well as my soul. That was the day I knew my mother was wrong. I closed myself off because that was better than dealing with the pain of losing something precious.”

“Like the girl when you were younger,” I whispered.

“Yes. It’s worked incredibly well over the years, allowing me to become the brutal monster you know me to be. But something happened that changed everything.” He took several steps closer, and the pitter patter of my heart echoed in my ears.

“What was that?” Were my words even audible?

“I fell in love with a beautiful, precious woman who refused to take any shit. A soft creature on the inside, but a fighter who could withstand both tangible and intangible evil. I didn’t want to feel alive again. I fought how amazing the moments had become, pretending that the passion shared was nothing but a game.”

Now he was within inches of me, close enough his voice reverberated against the skin of my neck.

“Is that so?” A single tear formed, slipping ever so slowly past my lashes.

“Yes. To me, she’s the reason I want to get up in the morning, to bask in the sunlight and warmth of her face and smile. She’s the reason that suddenly every scent has become richer, more sensual and food a delightful experience. She’s the only person who’s ever managed to break through my hard shell, refusing to allow me to succumb to my demons.”

Every inch of my skin tingled, vibrant lights flashing in front of my eyes. When he brushed the tip of a single finger down my arm, nothing could keep the husky moans from escaping my lips.

“And she’s the woman I’d like to spend the rest of my life with.”

For a few seconds I couldn’t move, couldn’t think clearly. Then I turned around, tilting my head as another tear joined

the first, trickling down my face. “You do?”

As he rubbed his thumb through one salty bead then the other, I melted into his arms, my legs shaking. “Yes, my beautiful *gatita*. I’m not a good man. God knows, you realize that better than anyone. But I promise you that I’ll do everything in my power to embrace the love that only comes around once in a lifetime and shouldn’t for a man like me.”

There was no hesitation, no second guessing. As he crushed my body against his, holding the back of my head, I rose onto my tiptoes. “I love you, Alessandro. And you are a decent man, only you’re too afraid to face who you are and what you want.”

“Maybe I’m not any longer.”

He captured my mouth, pulling me as tightly against him as possible. While I knew our relationship would never be normal, always filled with uncertainty and danger, I couldn’t imagine spending another day without him.

Fairytales? They were for people living in perfect bubbles, refusing to accept the good with the bad. This was an epic tale of love and tragedy, but our strength would conquer all.

* * *

Sierra

Ten months later

“Would you stop fussing?” Dierdre huffed as she squeezed my arms, forcing me to stand still in front of the mirror.

“Who’s fussing?” Grinning, I studied our reflections in the tall, oval mirror and tried not to think about Clarice. If only she could be here.

“Um. Let’s just say you’ve been a pain in the ass. For everyone. There. I think it’s perfect.” She stepped back,

studying my reflection.

“Everything has to be perfect, not just my dress.”

“For God’s sake, you have Brittany pulling her hair out making certain the bistro is decorated to the hilt. This invitation must be used. This cake. These flowers. These decorations. I’m exhausted and I’m just your maid of honor. You’re going to have the most beautiful reception.” She stomped away from me, grabbing the glass of champagne. “Drink this or so fucking help me God, I’ll tie you up and force the liquid down your throat.”

Her demanding tone made me laugh. I accepted the glass, taking another glance at the dress. The simple pattern accentuated my curves without being too fluffy. There were no priceless jewels or beads on a long train. There was no veil. It *was* perfect.

“I’m glad you’re happy,” she said as she joined me, glass in hand.

“I am. And it’s not just a reception.”

“I know. I know. You’ve told me more than once. Geez.” Dierdre rolled her eyes. “Let’s get this party started.”

“Did the painting arrive in time?” I asked, the present something I knew Alessandro would love.

“Yes, whoever this artist is, he or she is amazing.” I gave her a look and she shrugged. “I didn’t hurt it. I just took a peek.”

“You’ll get to meet *him* today. And he’s very sexy. Tall, dark, and handsome with a sexy accent and a killer smile.”

She wrinkled her nose. “Married?”

“Nope. I think he’s perfect for you.”

Dierdre said nothing but eased her hand down her dress. All I could do was laugh. I had a feeling Cruz would find her irresistible.

“Where is Matteo?”

She lifted her eyebrow. “Your bodyguard? Really?”

“No, goofy. The other delectable creature. You know, the one I named after my bodyguard.”

“Is there something you’re not telling me?” she teased.

I made a pinched face on purpose. “You know if I touched another man, Alessandro would string him up and allow the blood to seep from his body slowly.”

“Ugh but true. Stop worrying. I have everything covered. Okay?” She backed away, groaning when we heard a knock on the door. “Let me see who it is.”

I knew exactly who it was. Him. The dark stranger. The man who’d stalked me, seduced me. Taken me.

And the man I’d fallen hopelessly in love with.

He burst his way in through the door, winking at Dierdre.

“You’re not supposed to be in here!” she chided.

“I can do anything I want,” he answered, half laughing.

“Men. A total pain in the ass. You have five minutes,” she told him as she wagged her finger in his face.

I was amazed how much he’d changed, tolerant of my friends and enjoying all the things I swore he never could. Nights in front of the television, watching a movie. Enjoying a glass of wine while reading a book at a small table while I worked. Making Mexican food together, laughing when it came out terribly inedible.

I’d been shocked when he’d purchased a modest but insanely gorgeous home in Raleigh. He’d set up a corporate facility in town, which shocked and terrified the mayor, but so far he was only handling legitimate business activities. Time would tell if it would last.

“Are you ready to be Mrs. Montenegro?” he asked.

Before I could answer, Matteo giggled and we both smiled. I took our little boy into my arms, kissing his forehead. “Very much so. Please tell me Cruz arrived for the christening.”

“Are you kidding me? He came armed with dozens of presents and none for us.” His smile was brighter than I’d seen it

before. As he slowly lifted his arm, rolling his knuckle down my cheek, I took a deep breath.

“A special day,” I whispered, trying hard not to become emotional.

“Because of you. My beautiful *gatita*, my salvation.”

Love wasn't easy. It was messy and complicated. It had edges instead of rounded curves. It was angry and sad, joyful and passionate. For us, embracing the understanding of love had become the breath of life, a steadfast connection that couldn't be broken by tragedy or death.

All because of a single phone call from a dark stranger in the middle of the night.

And it had changed everything...

The End

AFTERWORD

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BOOKS OF THE SINNERS AND SAINTS SERIES

Beautiful Villain

When I knocked on Kirill Sabatin's door, I didn't know he was the Kozlov Bratva's most feared enforcer. I didn't expect him to be the most terrifyingly sexy man I've ever laid eyes on either...

I told him off for making so much noise in the middle of the night, but if the crack of his palm against my bare bottom didn't wake everyone in the building my screams of climax certainly did.

I shouldn't have let him spank me, let alone seduce me. He's a dangerous man and I could easily end up in way over my head. But the moment I set eyes on those rippling, sweat-slicked muscles I knew I needed that beautiful villain to take me long and hard and savagely right then and there.

And he did.

Now I just have to hope him claiming me doesn't start a mob war...

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Beautiful Sinner

When I first screamed his name in shameful surrender, Sevastian Kozlov was the enemy, the heir of a rival family who had just finished spanking me into submission after I dared to defy him.

Though he'd already claimed my body by the time he claimed me as his bride, no matter how desperately I long for his touch I vowed this beautiful sinner would never conquer my heart.

But it wasn't up to me...

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Beautiful Seduction

In my late-night hunt for the perfect pastry, I never expected to be the victim of a brutal attack... or for a brooding, blue-eyed stranger to become my savior, tending to my wounds while easing my fears. The electricity exploded between us, turning into a night of incredible passion.

Only later did I learn that Valentin Vincheti is the heir to the New York Italian mafia empire.

Then he came to take me, and this time he wasn't gentle. I shouldn't have surrendered, but with each savage kiss and stinging stroke of his belt his beautiful seduction became more difficult to resist. But when one of his enemies sets his sights on me, will my secrets put our lives at risk?

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Beautiful Obsession

After I was left at the altar, I turned what was meant to be the reception into an epic party. But when a handsome stranger asked me to dance, I wasn't prepared for the passion he ignited.

He told me he was a very bad man, but that only made my heart race faster as I lay bare and bound, my dress discarded and my bottom sore from a spanking, waiting for him to ravage me.

It was supposed to be just one night. No strings. Nothing to entangle me in his dangerous world.

But that was before I became his beautiful obsession...

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Beautiful Devil

Kostya Baranov is an infamous assassin, a man capable of incredible savagery, but when I witnessed a mafia hit he didn't silence me with a bullet. He decided to make me his instead.

Taken prisoner and forced to obey or feel the sting of his belt, shameful lust for my captor soon wars with fury at what he has done to me... and what he keeps doing to me with every touch.

But though he may be a beautiful devil, it is my own family's secret which may damn us both.

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BOOKS OF THE BENEDETTI EMPIRE SERIES

Cruel Prince

Catherine's father conspired to have my father killed, and that debt to the Benedetti family must be settled. Just as he took something from me, I will take something from him.

His daughter.

She will be mine to punish and ravage, but when she suffers it will not be for his sins.

It will be for my pleasure.

She will beg, but it will be for me to claim her in the most shameful ways imaginable.

She will scream, but it will be because she doesn't think she can bear another climax.

But when she surrenders at last, it will not be to her captor.

It will be to her husband.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Ruthless Prince

Alexandra is a senator's daughter, used to mingling in the company of the rich and powerful, but tonight she will learn that there are men who play by different rules.

Men like me.

I could romance her. I could seduce her and then carry her gently to my bed.

But that can wait. Tonight I'm going to wring one ruthless climax after another from her quivering body with her bottom burning from my belt and her throat sore from screaming.

She will know she is mine before she even knows she is my bride.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Savage Prince

Gillian's father may be a powerful Irish mob boss, but he owes a blood debt to my family, and when I came to collect I didn't ask permission before taking his daughter as payment.

It was not up to him... or to her.

I will make her my bride, but I am not the kind of man who will wait until our wedding night to bare her and claim what belongs to me. She will walk down the aisle wet, well-used, and sore.

Her dress will hide the marks from my belt that taught her the consequences of disobeying her husband, but nothing will hide her blushes as her arousal drips down her thighs with each step.

By the time she says her vows she will already be mine.

Buy on Amazon

BOOKS OF THE MERCILESS KINGS SERIES

King's Captive

Emily Porter saw me kill a man who betrayed my family and she helped put me behind bars. But someone with my connections doesn't stay in prison long, and she is about to learn the hard way that there is a price to pay for crossing the boss of the King dynasty. A very, very painful price...

She's going to cry for me as I blister that beautiful bottom, then she's going to scream for me as I ravage her over and over again, taking her in the most shameful ways she can imagine. But leaving her well-punished and well-used is just the beginning of what I have in store for Emily.

I'm going to make her my bride, and then I'm going to make her mine completely.

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King's Hostage

When my life was threatened, Michael King didn't just take matters into his own hands.

He took me.

When he carried me off it was partly to protect me, but mostly it was because he wanted me.

I didn't choose to go with him, but it wasn't up to me. That's why I'm naked, wet, and sore in an opulent Swiss chalet with my bottom still burning from the belt of the infuriatingly sexy mafia boss who brought me here, punished me when I fought him, and then savagely made me his.

We'll return when things are safe in New Orleans, but I won't be going back to my old home.

I belong to him now, and he plans to keep me.

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King's Possession

Her father had to be taught what happens when you cross a King, but that isn't why Genevieve Rossi is sore, well-used, and waiting for me to claim her in the only way I haven't already.

She's sore because she thought she could embarrass me in public without being punished.

She's well-used because after I spanked her I wanted more, and I take what I want.

She's waiting for me in my bed because she's my bride, and tonight is our wedding night.

I'm not going to be gentle with her, but when she wakes up tomorrow morning wet and blushing her cheeks won't be crimson because of the shameful things I did to her naked, quivering body.

It will be because she begged for all of them.

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King's Toy

Vincenzo King thought I knew something about a man who betrayed him, but that isn't why I'm on my way to New Orleans well-used and sore with my backside still burning from his belt.

When he bared and punished me maybe it was just business, but what came after was not.

It was savage, it was shameful, and it was very, very personal.

I'm his toy now, and not the kind you keep in its box on the shelf.

He's going to play rough with me.

He's going to get me all wet and dirty.

Then he's going to do it all again tomorrow.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

King's Demands

Julieta Morales hoped to escape an unwanted marriage, but the moment she got into my car her fate was sealed. She will have a husband, but it won't be the cartel boss her father chose for her.

It will be me.

But I'm not the kind of man who takes his bride gently amid rose petals on her wedding night. She'll learn to satisfy her King's demands with her bottom burning and her hair held in my fist.

She'll promise obedience when she speaks her vows, but she'll be mastered long before then.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

King's Temptation

I didn't think I needed Dimitri Kristoff's protection, but it wasn't up to me. With a kingpin from a rival family coming after me, he took charge, took off his belt, and then took what he wanted.

He knows I'm not used to doing as I'm told. He just doesn't care.

The stripes seared across my bare bottom left me sore and sorry, but it was what came after that truly left me shaken. The princess of the King family shouldn't be on her knees for anyone, let alone this Bratva brute who has decided to claim for himself what he was meant to safeguard.

Nobody gave me to him, but I'm his anyway.

Now he's going to make sure I know it.

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BOOKS OF THE MAFIA MASTERS SERIES

His as Payment

Caroline Hargrove thinks she is mine because her father owed me a debt, but that isn't why she is sitting in my car beside me with her bottom sore inside and out.

She's wet, well-used, and coming with me whether she likes it or not because I decided I want her, and I take what I want.

As a senator's daughter, she probably thought no man would dare lay a hand on her, let alone spank her thoroughly and then claim her beautiful body in the most shameful ways possible.

She was wrong. Very, very wrong. She's going to be mastered, and I won't be gentle about it.

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Taken as Collateral

Francesca Alessandro was just meant to be collateral, held captive as a warning to her father, but then she tried to fight me. She ended up sore and soaked as I taught her a lesson with my belt and then screaming with every savage climax as I taught her to obey in a much more shameful way.

She's mine now. Mine to keep. Mine to protect. Mine to use as hard and as often as I please.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Forced to Cooperate

Willow Church is not the first person who tried to put a bullet in me. She's just the first I let live. Now she will pay the price in the most shameful way imaginable. The stripes from my belt will teach her to obey, but what happens to her sore, red bottom after that will teach the real lesson.

She will be used mercilessly, over and over, and every brutal climax will remind her of the humiliating truth: she never even had a chance against me. Her body always knew its master.

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Claimed as Revenge

Valencia Rivera became mine the moment her father broke the agreement he made with me. She thought she had a say in the matter, but my belt across her beautiful bottom taught her otherwise and a night spent screaming her surrender into the sheets left her in no doubt she belongs to me.

Using her hard and often will not be all it takes to tame her properly, but it will be a good start...

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Made to Beg

Sierra Fox showed up at my door to ask for my protection, and I gave it to her... for a price. She belongs to me now, and I'm going to use her beautiful body as thoroughly as I please. The only thing for her to decide is how sore her cute little bottom will be when I'm through claiming her.

She came to me begging for help, but as her moans and screams grow louder with every brutal climax, we both know it won't be long before she begs me for something far more shameful.

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BOOKS OF THE DARK OVERTURE SERIES

Indecent Invitation

I shouldn't be here.

My clothes shouldn't be scattered around the room, my bottom shouldn't be sore, and I certainly shouldn't be screaming into the sheets as a ruthless tycoon takes everything he wants from me.

I shouldn't even know Houston Powers at all, but I was in a bad spot and I was made an offer.

A shameful, indecent offer I couldn't refuse.

I was desperate, I needed the money, and I didn't have a choice. Not a real one, anyway.

I'm here because I signed a contract, but I'm his because he made me his.

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Illicit Proposition

I should have known better.

His proposition was shameful. So shameful I threw my drink in his face when I heard it.

Then I saw the look in his eyes, and I knew I'd made a mistake.

I fought as he bared me and begged as he spanked me, but it didn't matter. All I could do was moan, scream, and climax helplessly for him as he took everything he wanted from me.

By the time I signed the contract, I was already his.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Unseemly Entanglement

I was warned about Frederick Duvall. I was told he was dangerous. But I never suspected that meeting the billionaire advertising mogul to discuss a business proposition would end with me bent over a table with my dress up and my panties down for a shameful lesson in obedience.

That should have been it. I should have told him what he could do with his offer and his money.

But I didn't.

I could say it was because two million dollars is a lot of cash, but as I stand before him naked, bound, and awaiting the sting of his cane for daring to displease him, I know that's not the truth.

I'm not here because he pays me. I'm here because he owns me.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

BOOKS OF THE CLUB DARKNESS SERIES

Bent to His Will

Even the most powerful men in the world know better than to cross me, but Autumn Sutherland thought she could spy on me in my own club and get away with it. Now she must be punished.

She tried to expose me, so she will be exposed. Bare, bound, and helplessly on display, she'll beg for mercy as my strap lashes her quivering bottom and my crop leaves its burning welts on her most intimate spots. Then she'll scream my name as she takes every inch of me, long and hard.

When I am done with her, she won't just be sore and shamefully broken. She will be mine.

[**Buy on Amazon**](#)

Broken by His Hand

Sophia Russo tried to keep away from me, but just thinking about what I would do to her left her panties drenched. She tried to hide it, but I didn't let her. I tore those soaked panties off, spanked her bare little bottom until she had no doubt who owns her, and then took her long and hard.

She begged and screamed as she came for me over and over, but she didn't learn her lesson...

She didn't just come back for more. She thought she could disobey me and get away with it.

This time I'm not just going to punish her. I'm going to break her.

[**Buy on Amazon**](#)

Bound by His Command

Willow danced for the rich and powerful at the world's most exclusive club... until tonight.

Tonight I told her she belongs to me now, and no other man will touch her again. Tonight I ripped her soaked panties from her beautiful body and taught her to obey with my belt.

Tonight I took her as mine, and I won't be giving her up.

[**Buy on Amazon**](#)

MORE MAFIA AND BILLIONAIRE ROMANCES BY PIPER STONE

Caught

If you're forced to come to an arrangement with someone as dangerous as Jagger Calduchi, it means he's about to take what he wants, and you'll give it to him... even if it's your body.

I got caught snooping where I didn't belong, and Jagger made me an offer I couldn't refuse. A week with him where his rules are the only rules, or his bought and paid for cops take me to jail.

He's going to punish me, train me, and master me completely. When he's used me so shamefully I blush just to think about it, maybe he'll let me go home... or maybe he'll decide to keep me.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Ruthless

Treating a mobster shot by a rival's goons isn't really my forte, but when a man is powerful enough to have a whole wing of a hospital cleared out for his protection, you do as you're told.

To make matters worse, this isn't first time I've met Giovanni Calduchi. It turns out my newest patient is the stern, sexy brute who all but dragged me back to his hotel room a couple of nights ago so he could use my body as he pleased, then showed up at my house the next day, stripped me bare, and spanked me until I was begging him to take me even more roughly and shamefully.

Now, with his enemies likely to be coming after me in order to get to him, all I can do is hope he's as good at keeping me safe as he is at keeping me blushing, sore, and thoroughly satisfied.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Dangerous

I knew Erik Chenault was dangerous the moment I saw him. Everything about him should have warned me away, from the scar on his face to the fact that mobsters call him Blade. But I was drawn like a moth to a flame, and I ended up burnt... and blushing, sore, and thoroughly used.

Now he's taken it upon himself to protect me from men like the ones we both tried to leave in our past. He's going to make me his whether I like it or not... but I think I'm going to like it.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Prey

Within moments of setting eyes on Sophia Waters, I was certain of two things. She was going to learn what happens to bad girls who cheat at cards, and I was going to be the one to teach her.

But there was one thing I didn't know as I reddened that cute little bottom and then took her long and hard and oh so shamefully: I wasn't the only one who didn't come here for a game of cards.

I came to kill a man. It turns out she came to protect him.

Nobody keeps me from my target, but I'm in no rush. Not when I'm enjoying this game of cat and mouse so much. I'll even let her catch me one day, and as she screams my name with each brutal climax she'll finally realize the truth. She was never the hunter. She was always the prey.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Given

Stephanie Michaelson was given to me, and she is mine. The sooner she learns that, the less often her cute little bottom will end up well-punished and sore as she is reminded of her place.

But even as she promises obedience with tears running down her cheeks, I know it isn't the sting of my belt that will truly tame her. It is what comes next that will leave her in no doubt she belongs to me. That part will be long, hard, and shameful... and I will make her beg for all of it.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Dangerous Stranger

I came to Spain hoping to start a new life away from dangerous men, but then I met Rafael Santiago. Now I'm not just caught up in the affairs of a mafia boss, I'm being forced into his car.

When I saw something I shouldn't have, Rafael took me captive, stripped me bare, and punished me until he felt certain I'd told him everything I knew about his organization... which was nothing at all. Then he offered me his protection in return for the right to use me as he pleases.

Now that I belong to him, his plans for me are more shameful than I could have ever imagined.

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Indebted

After her father stole from me, I could have left Alessandra Toro in jail for a crime she didn't commit. But I have plans for her. A deal with the judge—the kind only a man like me can arrange—made her my captive, and she will pay her father's debt with her beautiful body.

She will try to run, of course, but it won't be the law that comes after her. It will be me.

The sting of my belt across her quivering bare bottom will teach Alessandra the price of defiance, but it is the far more shameful penance that follows which will truly tame her.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Taken

When Winter O'Brien was given to me, she thought she had a say in the matter. She was wrong.

She is my bride. Mine to claim, mine to punish, and mine to use as shamefully as I please. The sting of my belt on her bare bottom will teach her to obey, but obedience is just the beginning.

I will demand so much more.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Bratva's Captive

I told Chloe Kingstrom that getting close to me would be dangerous, and she should keep her distance. The moment she disobeyed and followed me into that bar, she became mine.

Now my enemies are after her, but it's not what they would do to her she should worry about.

It's what I'm going to do to her.

My belt across her bare backside will teach her obedience, but what comes after will be different.

She's going to blush, beg, and scream with every climax as she's ravaged more thoroughly than she can imagine. Then I'm going to flip her over and claim her in an even more shameful way.

If she's a good girl, I might even let her enjoy it.

Buy on Amazon

Hunted

Hope Gracen was just another target to be tracked down... until I caught her.

When I discovered I'd been lied to, I carried her off.

She'll tell me the truth with her bottom still burning from my belt, but that isn't why she's here.

I took her to protect her. I'm keeping her because she's mine.

Buy on Amazon

Theirs as Payment

Until mere moments ago, I was a doctor heading home after my shift at the hospital. But that was before I was forced into the back seat of an SUV, then bared and spanked for trying to escape.

Now I'm just leverage for the Cabello brothers to use against my father, but it isn't the thought of being held hostage by these brutes that has my heart racing and my whole body quivering.

It is the way they're looking at me...

Like they're about to tear my clothes off and take turns mounting me like wild beasts.

Like they're going to share me, using me in ways more shameful than I can even imagine.

Like they own me.

Buy on Amazon

Ruthless Acquisition

I knew the shameful stakes when I bet against these bastards. I just didn't expect to lose.

Now they've come to collect their winnings.

But they aren't just planning to take a belt to my bare bottom for trying to run and then claim everything they're owed from my naked, helpless body as I blush, beg,

and scream for them.

They've acquired me, and they plan to keep me.

Buy on Amazon

Bound by Contract

I knew I was in trouble the moment Gregory Steele called me into his office, but I wasn't expecting to end up stripped bare and bent over his desk for a painful lesson from his belt.

Taking a little bit of money here and there might have gone unnoticed in another organization, but stealing from one of the most powerful mafia bosses on the West Coast has consequences.

It doesn't matter why I did it. The only thing that matters now is what he's going to do to me.

I have no doubt he will use me shamefully, but he didn't make me sign that contract just to show me off with my cheeks blushing and my bottom sore under the scandalous outfit he chose for me.

Now that I'm his, he plans to keep me.

Buy on Amazon

Dangerous Addiction

I went looking for a man working with my enemies. When I found only her instead, I should have just left her alone... or maybe taken what I wanted from her and then left... but I didn't.

I couldn't.

So I carried her off to keep for myself.

She didn't make it easy for me, and that earned her a lesson in obedience. A shameful one.

But as her bare bottom reddens under my punishing hand I can see her arousal dripping down her quivering thighs, and no matter how much she squirms and sobs and begs we both know exactly what she needs, and we both know as soon as this spanking is over I'm going to give it to her.

Hard.

Buy on Amazon

Auction House

When I went undercover to investigate a series of murders with links to Steele Franklin's auction house operation, I expected to be sold for the humiliating use of one of his fellow billionaires.

But he wanted me for himself.

No contract. No agreed upon terms. No say in the matter at all except whether to surrender to his shameful demands without a fight or make him strip me bare and spank me into submission first.

I chose the second option, but as one devastating climax after another is forced from my naked, quivering body, what scares me isn't the thought of him keeping

me locked up in a cage forever.

It's knowing he won't need to.

Buy on Amazon

Interrogated

As Liam McGinty's belt lashes my bare backside, it isn't the burning sting or the humiliating awareness that my body's surrender is on full display for this ruthless mobster that shocks me.

It's the fact that this isn't a scene from one of my books.

I almost can't process the fact that I'm really riding in the back of a luxury SUV belonging to the most powerful Irish mafia boss in New York—the man I've written so much about—with my cheeks blushing, my bottom sore inside and out, and my arousal soaking the seat beneath me.

But whether I can process it or not, I'm his captive now.

Maybe he'll let me go when he's gotten the answers he needs and he's used me as he pleases.

Or maybe he'll keep me...

Buy on Amazon

Vow of Seduction

Alexander Durante, Brogan Lancaster, and Daniel Norwood are powerful, dangerous men, but that won't keep them safe from me. Not after they let my brother take the fall for their crimes.

I spent years preparing for my chance at revenge. But things didn't go as planned...

Now I'm naked, bound, and helpless, waiting to be used and punished as these brutes see fit, and yet what's on my mind isn't how to escape all of the shameful things they're going to do to me.

It's whether I even want to...

Buy on Amazon

Brutal Heir

When I went to an author convention, I didn't expect to find myself enjoying a rooftop meal with the sexiest cover model in the business, let alone screaming his name in bed later that night.

I didn't plan to be targeted by assassins, rushed to a helicopter under cover of armed men, and then spirited away to his home country with my bottom still burning from a spanking either, but it turns out there are some really important things I didn't know about Diavolo Montoya...

Like the fact that he's the heir to a notorious crime syndicate.

I should hate him, but even as his prisoner our connection is too intense to ignore, and I'm beginning to realize that what began as a moment of passion is going to end with me as his.

Forever.

Buy on Amazon

BOOKS OF THE EAGLE FORCE SERIES

Debt of Honor

Isabella Adams is a brilliant scientist, but her latest discovery has made her a target of Russian assassins. I've been assigned to protect her, and when her reckless behavior puts her in danger she'll learn in the most shameful of ways what it means to be under the command of a Marine.

She can beg and plead as my belt lashes her bare backside, but the only mercy she'll receive is the chance to scream as she climaxes over and over with her well-spanked bottom still burning.

As my past returns to haunt me, it'll take every skill I've mastered to keep her alive.

She may be a national treasure, but she belongs to me now.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Debt of Loyalty

After she was kidnapped in broad daylight, I was hired to bring Willow Cavanaugh home, but as the daughter of a wealthy family she's used to getting what she wants rather than taking orders.

Too bad.

She'll do as she's told or she'll earn herself a stern, shameful reminder of who is in charge, but it will take more than just a well-spanked bare bottom to truly tame this feisty little rich girl.

She'll learn her place over my knee, but it's in my bed that I'll make her mine.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

BOOKS OF THE DANGEROUS BUSINESS SERIES

Persuasion

Her father stole something from the mob and they hired me to get it back, but that's not the real reason Giliana Worthington is locked naked in a cage with her bottom well-used and sore.

I brought her here so I could take my time punishing her, mastering her, and ravaging her helpless, quivering body over and over again as she screams and moans and begs for more.

I didn't take her as a hostage. I took her because she is mine.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Bad Men

I thought I could run away from the marriage the mafia arranged for me, but I ended up held prisoner in a foreign country by someone far more dangerous than the man I tried to escape.

Then Jack and Diego came for me.

They didn't ask if I wanted to be theirs. They just took me.

I ran, but they caught me, stripped me bare, and punished me in the most shameful way possible.

Now they're going to share me, and they're not going to be gentle about it.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

BOOKS OF THE MONTANA BAD BOYS SERIES

Hawk

He's a big, angry Marine, and I'm going to be sore when he's done with me.

Hawk Travers is not a man to be trifled with. I learned that lesson in the hardest way possible, first with a painful, humiliating public spanking and then much more shamefully in private.

She came looking for trouble. She got a taste of my belt instead.

Bryce Myers pushed me too far and she ended up with her bottom welted. But as satisfying as it is to hear this feisty little reporter scream my name as I put her in her place, I get the feeling she isn't going to stop snooping around no matter how well-used and sore I leave her cute backside.

She's gotten herself in way over her head, but she's mine now, and I protect what's mine.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Scorpion

He didn't ask if I like it rough. It wasn't up to me.

I thought I could get away with pissing off a big, tough Marine. I ended up with my face planted in the sheets, my burning bottom raised high, and my hair held tightly in his fist as he took me long and hard and taught me the kind of shameful lesson only a man like Scorpion could teach.

She was begging for a taste of my belt. She got much more than that.

Getting so tipsy she thought she could be sassy with me in my own bar earned Caroline a spanking, but it was trying to make off with my truck that sealed the deal. She'll feel my belt across her bare backside, then she'll scream my name as she takes every single inch of me.

This naughty girl needs to be put in her place, and I'm going to enjoy every moment of it.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Mustang

I tried to tell him how to run his ranch. Then he took off his belt.

When I heard a rumor about his ranch, I confronted Mustang about it. I thought I could go toe to toe with the big, tough former Marine, but I ended up blushing, sore, and very thoroughly used.

I told her it was going to hurt. I meant it.

Danni Brexton is a hot little number with a sharp tongue and a chip on her shoulder. She's the kind of trouble that needs to be ridden hard and put away wet, but only after a taste of my belt.

It will take more than just a firm hand and a burning bottom to tame this sassy spitfire, but I plan to keep her safe, sound, and screaming my name in bed whether she likes it or not. By the time I'm through with her, there won't be a shadow of a doubt in her mind that she belongs to me.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Nash

When he caught me on his property, he didn't call the police. He just took off his belt.

Nash caught me breaking into his shed while on the run from the mob, and when he demanded answers and obedience I gave him neither. Then he took off his belt and taught me in the most shameful way possible what happens to naughty girls who play games with a big, rough Marine.

She's mine to protect. That doesn't mean I'm going to be gentle with her.

Michelle doesn't just need a place to hide out. She needs a man who will bare her bottom and spank her until she is sore and sobbing whenever she puts herself at risk with reckless defiance, then shove her face into the sheets and make her scream his name with every savage climax.

She'll get all of that from me, and much, much more.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Austin

I offered this brute a ride. I ended up the one being ridden.

The first time I saw Austin, he was hitchhiking. I stopped to give him a lift, but I didn't end up taking this big, rough former Marine wherever he was heading. He was far too busy taking me.

She thought she was in charge. Then I took off my belt.

When Francesca Montgomery pulled up beside me, I didn't know who she was, but I knew what she needed and I gave it to her. Long, hard, and thoroughly, until she was screaming my name as she climaxed over and over with her quivering bare bottom still sporting the marks from my belt.

But someone wants to hurt her, and when someone tries to hurt what's mine, I take it personally.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

BOOKS OF THE ALPHA DYNASTY SERIES

Unchained Beast

As the firstborn of the Dupree family, I have spent my life building the wealth and power of our mafia empire while keeping our dark secret hidden and my savage hunger at bay. But the beast within me cannot be chained forever, and I must claim a mate before I lose control completely...

That is why Coraline LeBlanc is mine.

When I mount and ravage her, it won't be because I want her. It will be because I need her.

But that doesn't mean I won't enjoy stripping her bare and spanking her until she surrenders, then making her beg and scream with every desperate climax as I take what belongs to me.

The beast will claim her, but I will keep her.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Savage Brute

It wasn't his mafia birthright that made Dax Dupree a monster. Years behind bars and a brutal war with a rival organization made him hard as steel, but the beast he can barely control was always there, and without a mate to mark and claim it would soon take hold of him completely.

I didn't know that when he showed up at my bar after closing and spanked me until I was wet and shamefully ready for him to mount and ravage me, or even when I woke the next morning with my throat sore from screaming and his seed still drying on my thighs. But I know it now.

Because I'm his mate.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Ruthless Monster

When Esme Rawlings looks at me, she sees many things. A ruthless mob boss. A key witness to the latest murder in an ongoing turf war. A guardian angel who saved her from a hitman's bullet.

But when I look at her, I see just one thing.

My mate.

She can investigate me as thoroughly as she feels necessary, prying into every aspect of my family's vast mafia empire, but the only truth she really needs to know about me she will learn tonight with her bare bottom burning and her protests drowned out by her screams of climax.

I take what belongs to me.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Ravenous Predator

Suzette Barker thought she could steal from the most powerful mafia boss in Philadelphia. My belt across her naked backside taught her otherwise, but as tears run down her cheeks and her arousal glistens on her bare thighs, there is something more important she will understand soon.

Kneeling at my feet and demonstrating her remorseful surrender in the most shameful way possible won't bring an end to this, nor will her screams of climax as I take her long and hard. She'll be coming with me and I'll be mounting and savagely rutting her as often as I please.

Not just because she owes me.

Because she's my mate.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Merciless Savage

Christoff Dupree doesn't strike me as the kind of man who woos a woman gently, so when I saw the flowers on my kitchen table I knew it wasn't just a gesture of appreciation for saving his life.

This ruthless mafia boss wasn't seducing me. Those roses mean that I belong to him now.

That I'm his to spank into shameful submission before he mounts me and claims me savagely.

That I'm his mate.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

BOOKS OF THE ALPHA BEASTS SERIES

King's Mate

Her scent drew me to her, but something deeper and more powerful told me she was mine. Something that would not be denied. Something that demanded I claim her then and there.

I took her the way a beast takes his mate. Roughly. Savagely. Without mercy or remorse.

She will run, and when she does she will be punished, but it is not me that she fears. Every quivering, desperate climax reminds her that her body knows its master, and that terrifies her.

She knows I am not a gentle king, and she will scream for me as she learns her place.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Beast's Claim

Raven is not one of my kind, but the moment I caught her scent I knew she belonged to me.

She is my mate, and when I claim her it will not be gentle. She can fight me, but her pleas for mercy as she is punished will soon give way to screams of climax as she is mounted and rutted.

By the time I am finished with her, the evidence of her body's surrender will be mingled with my seed as it drips down her bare thighs. But she will be more than just sore and utterly spent.

She will be mine.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Alpha's Mate

I didn't ask Nicolina to be my mate. It was not up to her. An alpha takes what belongs to him.

She will plead for mercy as she is bared and punished for daring to run from me, but her screams as she is claimed and rutted will be those of helpless climax as her body surrenders to its master.

She is mine, and I'm going to make sure she knows it.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

MORE STORMY NIGHT BOOKS BY PIPER STONE

Claimed by the Beasts

Though she has done her best to run from it, Scarlet Dumane cannot escape what is in store for her. She has known for years that she is destined to belong not just to one savage beast, but to three, and now the time has come for her to be claimed. Soon her mates will own every inch of her beautiful body, and she will be shared and used as roughly and as often as they please.

Scarlet hid from the disturbing truth about herself, her family, and her town for as long as she could, but now her grandmother's death has finally brought her back home to the bayous of Louisiana and at last she must face her fate, no matter how shameful and terrifying.

She will be a queen, but her mates will be her masters, and defiance will be thoroughly punished. Yet even when she is stripped bare and spanked until she is sobbing, her need for them only grows, and every blush, moan, and quivering climax binds her to them more tightly. But with enemies lurking in the shadows, can she trust her mates to protect her from both man and beast?

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Millionaire Daddy

Dominick Asbury is not just a handsome millionaire whose deep voice makes Jenna's tummy flutter whenever they are together, nor is he merely the first man bold enough to strip her bare and spank her hard and thoroughly whenever she has been naughty. He is much more than that.

He is her daddy.

He is the one who punishes her when she's been a bad girl, and he is the one who takes her in his arms afterwards and brings her to one climax after another until she is utterly spent and satisfied.

But something shady is going on behind the scenes at Dominick's company, and when Jenna draws the wrong conclusion from a poorly written article about him and creates an embarrassing public scene, will she end up not only costing them both their jobs but losing her daddy as well?

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Conquering Their Mate

For years the Cenzans have cast a menacing eye on Earth, but it still came as a shock to be captured, stripped bare, and claimed as a mate by their leader and his most trusted warriors.

It infuriates me to be punished for the slightest defiance and forced to submit to these alien brutes, but as I'm led naked through the corridors of their ship, my well-punished bare bottom and my helpless arousal both fully on display, I cannot help wondering how long it will be until I'm kneeling at the feet of my mates and begging them take me as shamefully as they please.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Captured and Kept

Since her career was knocked off track in retaliation for her efforts to expose a sinister plot by high-ranking government officials, reporter Danielle Carver has been stuck writing puff pieces in a small town in Oregon. Desperate for a serious story, she sets out to investigate the rumors she's been hearing about mysterious men living in the mountains nearby. But when she secretly follows them back to their remote cabin, the ruggedly handsome beasts don't take kindly to her snooping around, and Dani soon finds herself stripped bare for a painful, humiliating spanking.

Their rough dominance arouses her deeply, and before long she is blushing crimson as they take turns using her beautiful body as thoroughly and shamefully as they please. But when Dani uncovers the true reason for their presence in the area, will more than just her career be at risk?

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Taming His Brat

It's been years since Cooper Dawson left her small Texas hometown, but after her stubborn defiance gets her fired from two jobs in a row, she knows something definitely needs to change. What she doesn't expect, however, is for her sharp tongue and arrogant attitude to land her over the knee of a stern, ruggedly sexy cowboy for a painful, embarrassing, and very public spanking.

Rex Sullivan cannot deny being smitten by Cooper, and the fact that she is in desperate need of his belt across her bare backside only makes the war-hardened ex-Marine more determined to tame the beautiful, fiery redhead. It isn't long before she's screaming his name as he shows her just how hard and roughly a cowboy can ride a headstrong filly. But Rex and Cooper both have secrets, and when the demons of their past rear their ugly heads, will their romance be torn apart?

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Capturing Their Mate

I thought the Cenzan invaders could never find me here, but I was wrong. Three of the alien brutes came to take me, and before I ever set foot aboard their ship I had already been stripped bare, spanked thoroughly, and claimed more shamefully than I would have ever thought possible.

They have decided that a public example must be made of me, and I will be punished and used in the most humiliating ways imaginable as a warning to anyone who might dare to defy them. But I am no ordinary breeder, and the secrets hidden in my past could change their world... or end it.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Rogue

Tracking down cyborgs is my job, but this time I'm the one being hunted. This rogue machine has spent most of his life locked up, and now that he's on the loose he has plans for me...

He isn't just going to strip me, punish me, and use me. He will take me longer and harder than any human ever could, claiming me so thoroughly that I will be left in no doubt who owns me.

No matter how shamefully I beg and plead, my body will be ravaged again and again with pleasure so intense it terrifies me to even imagine, because that is what he was built to do.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Roughneck

When I took a job on an oil rig to escape my scheming stepfather's efforts to set me up with one of his business cronies, I knew I'd be working with rugged men. What I didn't expect is to find myself bent over a desk, my cheeks soaked with tears and my bare thighs wet for a very different reason, as my well-punished bottom is thoroughly used by a stern, infuriatingly sexy roughneck.

Even though I should have known better than to get sassy with a firm-handed cowboy, let alone a tough-as-nails former Marine, there's no denying that learning the hard way was every bit as hot as it was shameful. But a sore, welted backside is just the start of his plans for me, and no matter how much I blush to admit it, I know I'm going to take everything he gives me and beg for more.

Buy on Amazon

Hunting Their Mate

As far as I'm concerned, the Cenzans will always be the enemy, and there can be no peace while they remain on our planet. I planned to make them pay for invading our world, but I was hunted down and captured by two of their warriors with the help of a battle-hardened former Marine. Now I'm the one who is going to pay, as the three of them punish me, shame me, and share me.

Though the thought of a fellow human taking the side of these alien brutes enrages me, that is far from the worst of it. With every searing stroke of the strap that lands across my bare bottom, with every savage thrust as I am claimed over and over, and with every screaming climax, it is made more clear that it is my own quivering, thoroughly used body which has truly betrayed me.

Buy on Amazon

Primitive

I was sent to this world to help build a new Earth, but I was shocked by what I found here. The men of this planet are not just primitive savages. They are predators, and I am now their prey...

The government lied to all of us. Not all of the creatures who hunted and captured me are aliens. Some of them were human once, specimens transformed in labs into little more than feral beasts.

I fought, but I was thrown over a shoulder and carried off. I ran, but I was caught and punished. Now they are going to claim me, share me, and use me so roughly that when the last screaming climax has been wrung from my naked, helpless body, I wonder if I'll still know my own name.

Buy on Amazon

Harvest

The Centurions conquered Earth long before I was born, but they did not come for our land or our resources. They came for mates, women deemed suitable for breeding. Women like me.

Three of the alien brutes decided to claim me, and when I defied them, they made a public example of me, punishing me so thoroughly and shamefully I might never stop blushing.

But now, as my virgin body is used in every way possible, I'm not sure I want them to stop...

Buy on Amazon

Torched

I work alongside firefighters, so I know how to handle musclebound roughnecks, but Blaise Tompkins is in a league of his own. The night we met, I threw a glass of wine in his face, then ended up shoved against the wall with my panties on the floor and my arousal dripping down my thighs, screaming out climax after shameful climax with my well-punished bottom still burning.

I've got a series of arsons to get to the bottom of, and finding out that the infuriatingly sexy brute who spanked me like a naughty little girl will be helping me with the investigation seemed like the last thing I needed, until somebody hurled a rock through my window in an effort to scare me away from the case. Now having a big, strong man around doesn't seem like such a bad idea...

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Fertile

The men who hunt me were always brutes, but now lust makes them barely more than beasts.

When they catch me, I know what comes next.

I will fight, but my need to be bred is just as strong as theirs is to breed. When they strip me, punish me, and use me the way I'm meant to be used, my screams will be the screams of climax.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Hostage

I knew going after one of the most powerful mafia bosses in the world would be dangerous, but I didn't anticipate being dragged from my apartment already sore, sorry, and shamefully used.

My captors don't just plan to teach me a lesson and then let me go. They plan to share me, punish me, and claim me so ruthlessly I'll be screaming my submission into the sheets long before they're through with me. They took me as a hostage, but they'll keep me as theirs.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Defiled

I was born to rule, but for her sake I am banished, forced to wander the Earth among mortals. Her virgin body will pay the price for my protection, and it will be a shameful price indeed.

Stripped, punished, and ravaged over and over, she will scream with every savage climax.

She will be defiled, but before I am done with her she will beg to be mine.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Kept

On the run from corrupt men determined to silence me, I sought refuge in his cabin.

I ate his food, drank his whiskey, and slept in his bed. But then the big bad bear came home and I learned the hard way that sometimes Goldilocks ends up with her cute little bottom well-used and sore.

He stripped me, spanked me, and ravaged me in the most shameful way possible, but then this rugged brute did something no one else ever has before. He made it

clear he plans to keep me...

Buy on Amazon

Auctioned

Twenty years ago the Malzeons saved us when we were at the brink of self-annihilation, but there was a price for their intervention. They demanded humans as servants... and as pets.

Only criminals were supposed to be offered to the aliens for their use, but when I defied Earth's government, asking questions that no one else would dare to ask, I was sold to them at auction.

I was bought by two of their most powerful commanders, rivals who nonetheless plan to share me. I am their property now, and they intend to tame me, train me, and enjoy me thoroughly.

But I have information they need, a secret guarded so zealously that discovering it cost me my freedom, and if they do not act quickly enough both of our worlds will soon be in grave danger.

Buy on Amazon

Hard Ride

When I snuck into Montana Cobalt's house, I was looking for help learning to ride like him, but what I got was his belt across my bare backside. Then with tears still running down my cheeks and arousal dripping onto my thighs, the big brute taught me a much more shameful lesson.

Montana has agreed to train me, but not just for the rodeo. He's going to break me in and put me through my paces, and then he's going to show me what it means to be ridden rough and dirty.

Buy on Amazon

Carnal

For centuries my kind have hidden our feral nature, our brute strength, and our carnal instincts. But this human female is my mate, and nothing will keep me from claiming and ravaging her.

She is mine to tame and protect, and if my belt doesn't teach her to obey then she'll learn in a much more shameful fashion. Either way, her surrender will be as complete as it is inevitable.

Buy on Amazon

Bounty

After I went undercover to take down a mob boss and ended up betrayed, framed, and on the run, Harper Rollins tried to bring me in. But instead of collecting a bounty, she earned herself a hard spanking and then an even rougher lesson that left her cute bottom sore in a very different way.

She's not one to give up without a fight, but that's fine by me. It just means I'll have plenty more chances to welt her beautiful backside and then make her scream her surrender into the sheets.

Buy on Amazon

Beast

Primitive, irresistible need compelled him to claim me, but it was more than mere instinct that drove this alien beast to punish me for my defiance and then ravage me thoroughly and savagely. Every screaming climax was a brand marking me as his, ensuring I never forget who I belong to.

He's strong enough to take what he wants from me, but that's not why I surrendered so easily as he stripped me bare, pushed me up against the wall, and made me his so roughly and shamefully.

It wasn't fear that forced me to submit. It was need.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Gladiator

Xander didn't just win me in the arena. The alien brute claimed me there too, with my punished bottom still burning and my screams of climax almost drowned out by the roar of the crowd.

Almost...

Victory earned him freedom and the right to take me as his mate, but making me truly his will mean more than just spanking me into shameful surrender and then rutting me like a wild beast. Before he carries me off as his prize, the dark truth that brought me here must be exposed at last.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Big Rig

Alexis Harding is used to telling men exactly what she thinks, but she's never had a roughneck like me as a boss before. On my rig, I make the rules and sassy little girls get stripped bare, bent over my desk, and taught their place, first with my belt and then in a much more shameful way.

She'll be sore and sorry long before I'm done with her, but the arousal glistening on her thighs reveals the truth she would rather keep hidden. She needs it rough, and that's how she'll get it.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Warriors

I knew this was a primitive planet when I landed, but nothing could have prepared me for the rough beasts who inhabit it. The sting of their prince's firm hand on my bare bottom taught me my place in his world, but it was what came after that truly demonstrated his mastery over me.

This alien brute has granted me his protection and his help with my mission, but the price was my total submission to both his shameful demands and those of his second in command as well.

But it isn't the savage way they make use of my quivering body that terrifies me the most. What leaves me trembling is the thought that I may never leave this place... because I won't want to.

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Owned

With a ruthless, corrupt billionaire after me, Crockett, Dylan, and Wade are just the men I need. Rough men who know how to keep a woman safe... and how to make her scream their names.

But the Hell's Fury MC doesn't do charity work, and their help will come at a price.

A shameful price...

They aren't just going to bare me, punish me, and then do whatever they want with me.

They're going to make me beg for it.

Buy on Amazon

Seized

Delaney Archer got herself mixed up with someone who crossed us, and now she's going to find out just how roughly and shamefully three bad men like us can make use of her beautiful body.

She can plead for mercy, but it won't stop us from stripping her bare and spanking her until she's sore, sobbing, and soaking wet. Our feisty little captive is going to take everything we give her, and she'll be screaming our names with every savage climax long before we're done with her.

Buy on Amazon

Cruel Masters

I thought I understood the risks of going undercover to report on billionaires flaunting their power, but these men didn't send lawyers after me. They're going to deal with me themselves.

Now I'm naked aboard their private plane, my backside already burning from one of their belts, and these three infuriatingly sexy bastards have only just gotten started teaching me my place.

I'm not just going to be punished, shamed, and shared. I'm going to be mastered.

Buy on Amazon

Hard Men

My father's will left his company to me, but the three roughnecks who ran it for him have other ideas. They're owed a debt and they mean to collect on it, but it's not money these brutes want.

It's me.

In return for protection from my father's enemies, I will be theirs to share. But these are hard men, and they don't just intend to punish my defiance and use me as shamefully as they please.

They plan to master me completely.

Buy on Amazon

Rough Ride

As I hear the leather slide through the loops of his pants, I know what comes next. Jake Travers is going to blister my backside. Then he's going to ride me the way only a rodeo champion can.

Plenty of men who thought they could put me in my place have learned the hard way that I was more than they could handle, and when Jake showed up I was sure he would be no different.

I was wrong.

When I pushed him, he bared and spanked me in front of a bar full of people.

I should have let it go at that, but I couldn't.

That's why he's taking off his belt...

Buy on Amazon

Primal Instinct

Ruger Jameson can buy anything he wants, but that's not the reason I'm his to use as he pleases.

He's a former Army Ranger accustomed to having his orders followed, but that's not why I obey him.

He saved my life after our plane crashed, but I'm not on my knees just to thank him properly.

I'm his because my body knows its master.

I do as I'm told because he blisters my bare backside every time I dare to do otherwise.

I'm at his feet because I belong to him and I plan to show it in the most shameful way possible.

Buy on Amazon

Captor

I was supposed to be safe from the lottery. Set apart for a man who would treat me with dignity.

But as I'm probed and examined in the most intimate, shameful ways imaginable while the hulking alien king who just spanked me looks on approvingly, I know one thing for certain.

This brute didn't end up with me by chance. He wanted me, so he found a way to take me.

He'll savor every blush as I stand bare and on display for him, every plea for mercy as he punishes my defiance, and every quivering climax as he slowly masters my virgin body.

I'll be his before he even claims me.

Buy on Amazon

Rough and Dirty

Wrecking my cheating ex's truck with a bat might have made me feel better... if the one I went after had actually belonged to him, instead of to the burly roughneck currently taking off his belt.

Now I'm bent over in a parking lot with my bottom burning as this ruggedly sexy bastard and his two equally brutish friends take turns reddening my ass, and I can tell they're just getting started.

That thought shouldn't excite me, and I certainly shouldn't be imagining all the shameful things these men might do to me. But what I should or shouldn't be thinking doesn't matter anyway.

They can see the arousal glistening on my thighs, and they know I need it rough and dirty...

Buy on Amazon

His to Take

When Zadok Vakan caught me trying to escape his planet with priceless stolen technology, he didn't have me sent to the mines. He made sure I was stripped bare and sold at auction instead.

Then he bought me for himself.

Even as he punishes me for the slightest hint of defiance and then claims me like a beast, indulging every filthy desire his savage nature can conceive, I swear I'll never surrender.

But it doesn't matter.

I'm already his, and we both know it.

Buy on Amazon

Tyrant

When I accepted a lucrative marketing position at his vineyard, Montgomery Wolfe made the terms of my employment clear right from the start. Follow his rules or face the consequences.

That's why I'm bent over his desk, doing my best to hate him as his belt lashes my bare bottom.

I shouldn't give in to this tyrant. I shouldn't yield to his shameful demands.

Yet I can't resist the passion he sets ablaze with every word, every touch, and every brutally possessive kiss, and I know before long my body will surrender to even his darkest needs...

Buy on Amazon

Filthy Rogue

Losing my job to a woman who slept her way to the top was bad enough, and that was before my car broke down as I drove cross country to start over. Having to be rescued by an infuriatingly sexy biker who promptly bared and spanked me for sassing him was just icing on the cake.

After sharing a passionate night, I might have made a teensy mistake in taking cash from his wallet in order to pay the auto mechanic, but I hadn't thought I'd ever see him again...

Then on the first day at my new job, guess who swaggered in with payback on his mind?

He's living proof that the universe really is out to get me... and he's my new boss.

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ABOUT PIPER STONE

Amazon Top 150 Internationally Best-Selling Author, Kindle Unlimited All Star Piper Stone writes in several genres. From her worlds of dark mafia, cowboys, and marines to contemporary reverse harem, shifter romance, and science fiction, she attempts to delight readers with a foray into darkness, sensuality, suspense, and always a romantic HEA. When she's not writing, you can find her sipping merlot while she enjoys spending time with her three Golden Retrievers (Indiana Jones, Magnum PI, and Remington Steele) and a husband who relishes creating fabulous food.

Dangerous is Delicious.

* * *

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